

Aide-de-Camp's Library



Rashtrapati Bhavan
New Delhi

Accn. No. 1087

Call No. VIII C1-8

SINK ME THE SHIP

Mystery

SEA-LION is a new writer of sea mystery stories. As a naval officer the authenticity of his settings is guaranteed, as was apparent in his first novel, *Phantom Fleet*. Now in his new book, *Sink Me The Ship*, he gives us a naval thriller involving Greek rebels in Crete, a lovely actress as the heroine, a stolen Egyptian treaty and an attempt to sabotage the Suez Canal by sinking Britain's newest battleship therein.

“ Sea-Lion ” has also written:.

PHANTOM FLEET

(which was subsequently dramatised and broadcast as a serial play by the B.B.C.)

SINK ME THE SHIP

A Story of the Navy

by

“SEA-LION”

*“ Sink me the ship, Master Gunner—sink her, split
her in twain!”*

COLLINS

14 ST. JAMES'S PLACE LONDON

1946

COPYRIGHT
PRINTED IN GREAT BRITAIN
COLLINS CLEAR-TYPE PRESS : LONDON AND GLASGOW
1946

To
ENID
and
LOIS

*in gratitude for, among other things, having inspired
the heroine of this yarn.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

This novel has been written for entertainment, wherefore the events recorded are no more than related to truth. All characters portrayed are fictitious. This is particularly true of the various officers occupying official positions in the Middle East and elsewhere who play their part, but who are in no way intended to represent past, present, or future holders of those posts. But if, in spite of this warning, any of my messmates or others with whom I spent a period in the Eastern Mediterranean not so very long ago, persist in seeing themselves portrayed herein, I hope they will realise that it is all kindly—very kindly—meant. From which it can be inferred that I have the honour to be serving in the British Navy—which is relevant only in so far as it should ensure that the naval background of the story is authentic.

LONDON
March, 1946.

PROLOGUE

IT ALL HAPPENED in the year 19— but why worry about dates? Suffice it to say that the story recorded in these pages would never have been written but for three events which took place in the now historic year in which the Third Reich surrendered unconditionally to Britain and her Allies after five and a half years of bloody war.

These events, widely separated in both time and place, had no connection with each other when they occurred. The machinations of a single individual, a man whose mind had been warped by frustrated ambition and vanity, subsequently brought them together.

It is the purpose of this prologue to record these three events.

A few kilometres to the south of Innsbruck, not far from the road which leads south over the Brenner Pass into Italy, a single close-cropped, square-headed private of the *Wehrmacht* stood on guard. Not all the beauties of the Alps which towered above him, resplendent in the sun of a late spring morning, could compensate him for the disinterested distaste with which he regarded his present duty. For what must have been the twentieth time since he had come on duty two hours before, he shifted the web sling of his rifle so that it rested more comfortably on his shoulder. Then he turned and began to pace round the small camouflaged building which it was his duty to guard.

The peaceful silence of this isolated spot was presently broken by the sound of a high-powered car. The sentry had apparently been expecting it, for he marched down to a small gate in the fence and stood looking down the track until the vehicle came into view. He seemed to recognise one at least of the five individuals who climbed stiffly out as soon as it came to rest, for he unlocked and

threw open the gate and stood to attention, waiting for them to enter.

Of the new arrivals, one was a junior officer in the *Wehrmacht*, and clearly no more than a guide detailed by the military commandant of the area to accompany the remainder of the party. Of the others, three, rather surprisingly, in view of the distance of southern Germany from the sea, wore the dark uniform of naval officers. Their stripes and badges of rank indicated a *Konteradmiral* and two *Kapitän sur See*. From their brutal features, their guttural speech, their arrogant bearing, all were clearly representatives of the Prussian race.

The fifth member of the party was in striking contrast. He was short, round-shouldered, dressed in an old and greasy grey tweed suit. And if it was thus clear that he was but a civilian, his dark overlong hair, his swarthy complexion, and the heavy close-knit eyebrows above his bloodshot eyes made it equally clear that he was no German. One would not have been far wrong in imagining that he came from one of the Balkan states, though the execrable accent with which he spoke the Teuton tongue might have led one into believing that he had after all come from Italy or Spain. Which confusion would be justified, since he had, in fact, been born in Athens of a Greek father and Spanish mother. Subsequently he had spent periods of his life, varying in length according to the degree of inquisitiveness of the police authorities, in the United States, in Brazil, in Portugal, in England and elsewhere. But though he was a nondescript figure, one was not long left in doubt about his personality: it was more than adequate to triumph over physical deficiencies. His German might be bad and his accent worse, but there was no denying the dynamic force behind each word he spoke, nor the almost effortless way in which he compelled others to follow him.

Carrying a rectangular leather-covered box in one hand, he led the way through the gate in the barbed wire fence, saying: "This way, Excellency."

The admiral grunted: "*Ja, gewiss, Herr Doktor,*" and complied. His two subordinates followed in silence.

On reaching the door of the building, the man addressed as Doctor produced a key and unlocked it. The quartet passed inside, one of the captains producing an electric torch with which to illuminate the interior. The Doctor spoke. "Now, Excellency," he said, "please examine this building. You will find that walls, roof and floor are all constructed of steel three inches thick. This may assist you."

He handed the Admiral a small hammer, which was at once passed on to one of the captains. The latter proceeded to tap the walls in several places, then the roof, and finally the floor. The Admiral himself examined their thickness where this was visible at the entrance. Finally he said: "We are satisfied, *Herr Doktor.*"

"I thank your Excellency. Now please to examine these cases." He indicated the painted metal boxes which filled the interior of the building from floor to roof, save for the comparatively small space in which the visitors were standing. "You will find that all are filled with cordite."

At a word from the Admiral, his two subordinates removed the lids from several of the cases and examined the contents.

Again the Admiral said: "We are satisfied, *Herr Doktor.*"

"Very well," was the impassive answer. "Now here is my new Z weapon, which you have already examined." Placing the box he had been carrying on the floor, the Doctor unlocked it and extracted a cylindrical object of polished bronze no larger than a one-pound jam jar. "First," he continued, "I will set the mechanism."

The Admiral placed a restraining hand on the Doctor's arm. "You are sure," he said apprehensively, "that it is quite safe?"

There was a suspicion of contempt in the tone of the reply: "Of course, Excellency. Besides, I have no more wish to be involved in an accident than you yourself."

"Very well, *Herr Doktor*, but let us be quick."

Without further words the Doctor made an adjustment to a small screw set in the base of the object he was holding; then placed it on its side in a gap between two of the cordite cases, and pushed it in until it was out of sight.

"Now, Excellency," he said, "the Z weapon is placed as it would be within the armoured magazine of an enemy ship which it is desired to destroy, and which this building and its contents exactly resemble."

The three naval officers nodded their heads to signify that they understood the purport of the Doctor's remarks. Whereupon he picked up his box and led the party outside, closing and locking the steel door of the structure after them.

In silence the quartet returned to the car and climbed in. The *Wehrmacht* lieutenant snapped an order to the sentry, who responded by securing the gate in the barbed wire fence. Lieutenant and sentry then climbed into the front seat of the car beside the driver, who at once let in his clutch, and set off along the much-rutted track which led away from the magazine towards the main road. After a fifteen-minute steady climb up towards the Brenner Pass the car stopped, and the occupants again descended. They walked to the edge of the road, where the three naval officers stood in a little group round the Doctor looking down into the valley below.

The little man pointed with his right arm. "You can just distinguish the magazine in which I have left the Z weapon to the right of that small copse over there. It is about three miles from us."

One of the captains, he who had carried the torch within the magazine, pointed to the Doctor's box, which he had placed on the ground just in front of the quartet. "We are to understand, *Herr Doktor*, that by means of a signal transmitted by the portable wireless set in that box you will detonate the Z weapon?"

"But certainly, *Herr Kapitän*. By using ultra-short waves I have achieved what has before always been

regarded as impossible. I can send a wireless signal, which will be picked up by the receiver in the Z weapon, although it is screened by inches of solid steel. And although the explosive charge contained in the weapon is very small, the new compound of trinitrotoluene and amatol which I have produced is so powerful that it will detonate all the cordite within the magazine and entirely destroy it."

The Captain only said, with a hint of distrust in his voice: "I shall believe the evidence of my own eyes, *Herr Doktor*."

At a nod from the Admiral, the Doctor raised the lid of the box at his feet, and withdrew three short lengths of brass rod, which he screwed together and fixed to the side. In explanation he remarked: "That is the aerial."

He moved a switch on the control panel of the portable transmitter, adjusted two small knobs, noted the reading of the needle of a meter. Satisfied, he said: "I am ready. Watch carefully."

There was a negligible pause, during which the eyes of the three naval officers lifted from the stocky little figure crouched before them over the wireless transmitter to stare down at the camouflaged roof of the armoured magazine in the valley below.

The Doctor snapped: "I fire," with which remark he pressed a small red knob on the panel of the transmitter.

Down by the copse in the valley, the green of the surrounding heath was suddenly splashed with a vivid sheet of yellow flame. Almost at once this was engulfed in a tall mushroom of black smoke, which rose a hundred feet or more in the air. And after a perceptible interval, the thunderous clap of an explosion reached the watchers' ears and was echoed back by the surrounding hills.

The doubting Captain was the first to speak: "Amazing," he said with considerable enthusiasm. "This weapon has great possibilities, Excellency. This new and more powerful explosive is good, but the means whereby it can be detonated under any circumstances—

even when screened by steel like we have seen to-day—is the important thing. Up to now we have always had to rely on a time-fuse. Sometimes that has great disadvantages. It is not accurate, and it has to be set when the charge is placed. One does not always know then when it will be required to explode.”

The other Captain commented: “One might place such a weapon in an enemy merchant ship whilst it was loading explosives in a neutral harbour. With this instrument, one of our agents could be sure of detonating it just as the ship was arriving at its destination. We should destroy the ship, block the channel, and do immense damage to the enemy’s port.”

Rubbing his hands together with pleasure, the little Doctor said: “It was with that idea that I developed the Z weapon. Are you satisfied, Excellency?”

At last the Admiral spoke: “With your demonstration, certainly, *Herr Doktor*. But I wish you had been able to produce your invention five years ago. Now I am afraid it may be too late.”

“Too late, Excellency? I do not understand.”

“Too late, *Herr Doktor*, because I fear this war will be finished before we have had time to use the Z weapon. No one can accuse me of disloyalty to our Fuehrer, but I am a realist. Our Fatherland is being rapidly overrun both on the east and in the west by our enemies. Our army cannot resist them for long enough to enable our glorious navy to use this new weapon.

One of the captains said: “Surely we should try to use it. There may yet be a chance.”

But the Admiral did not reply. He only shook his head as he turned and walked towards the car. His two subordinates shrugged their shoulders in mute acceptance of their superior’s thus declared recognition of their impending defeat, and turned to follow him.

Slowly the little Doctor unscrewed and stowed away the aerial of his transmitter and closed and secured the lid. It was as he picked it up and walked slowly over to

the car that a strange gleam came into his bloodshot eyes and his lips moved.

"Too late, is it," he said, "for my beautiful Z weapon to be used? I wonder. By Germany, perhaps. But there are always others."

His words were inaudible to those who had accompanied the Doctor, for they were already seated in the car. And they were far too anxious to hasten back to their headquarters in Innsbruck to notice the sardonic smile upon the little man's features as he climbed in beside them.

It should be added that when, some three weeks later, the Third Reich surrendered unconditionally to the United Nations and the Innsbruck area was occupied by United States Forces, the little Doctor ran no risk of internment or even interrogation. He had already passed, with the secret of his invention, over the near-by frontier into the security of Switzerland.

The second event which it is the purpose of this prologue to record took place some months later in London in the House of Commons. It is best set down in the terse words of the Official Report, better known as Hansard:

ANGLO-EGYPTIAN TREATY

Hon. Member for Northport (by Private Notice) asked the Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs whether, now that Britain was no longer at war, it was intended that British forces should continue to be stationed in Egypt.

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs: British forces are stationed in Egypt in accordance with the terms of the Anglo-Egyptian treaty.

Hon. Member for Northport: May I ask the Minister to answer my question, which was whether it was intended that our forces should *continue* to be stationed in Egypt?

The Secretary of State for Foreign Affairs: I was

hoping that the Hon. Gentleman would not press that point. He will be aware that the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty is due for revision early next year. His Majesty's Government intend to open discussions with the Egyptian Government shortly.

A Member: Does the Minister consider the maintenance of British forces in Egypt compatible with that nation's position as a sovereign independent state?

The Prime Minister: Mr. Speaker, sir, may I be permitted to intervene in this matter to inform Hon. Members that their persistence in pursuing this question is likely to hinder the attempts of His Majesty's Government to frame a new treaty with Egypt. But until such times as the terms of the new treaty are mutually agreed with the Egyptian Government, it is vitally important that they shall be kept secret. I must ask the House to do nothing which would tend to embarrass a somewhat delicate position.

The third and last event to be recorded also took place in London, but some weeks later.

In a room in the Admiralty two senior naval officers were in conference. The one wore the uniform of a vice-admiral, and occupied the post of Vice-Chief of the Naval Staff; the other was Captain Bellamy, Director of the Operations Division.

Captain Bellamy was speaking. "We must, sir," he said, "give C.-in-C. Home Fleet a decision now about the *Colossus*. He knows she's due to join the Second Battle Squadron. Although we've never said when, he knows that she's commissioning for trials this week, and could therefore join his flag in a month's time."

The V.C.N.S. answered: "If we let her join the Home Fleet at once, Sir Robert will take her as his flagship before she's had time to work up properly. I know him well. In some respects he's still like a boy, and the *Colossus* would be like a new toy to him. He wouldn't be able to keep his hands off her."

Captain Bellamy smiled. "I'm afraid many of us would be like that, sir," he commented.

"Possibly," replied the V.C.N.S., "but that doesn't make the decision a sound one. The *Colossus* is our latest battleship. She's packed with new equipment of every sort, much of which has hardly been to sea before. Those responsible for it want the opportunity of carrying out extended trials to prove its value, to decide whether it should be fitted in other ships."

"Which would not be easy, if she was C.-in-C. H.F.'s flagship, sir."

"Exactly. What's C.-in-C. Home Fleet's alternative, Bellamy?"

"He can keep the *Drake* until November next year, sir. The Contoller doesn't want to take her in hand for refit until then."

The V.C.N.S. was silent for a moment, gazing down at the figures of pedestrians hurrying across the sunlit gravel square.

"I think that settles it, Bellamy," he said. "The Cabinet are anxious, now the war is over, for ships to show the flag as much as possible. Nothing could be better than a voyage round the world by our newest battleship. We'll send her east through the Mediterranean and Suez Canal via India to Australia and New Zealand, and home via South America, the States and Canada. It'll take her nearly a year, and she can do all the trials required on the way."

A broad grin spread over Captain Bellamy's bearded face. "I'm glad you made that decision, sir," he said, "and not me."

"Why do you say that?"

"No captain could ask for more, sir, and I might be accused of being an interested party."

The V.C.N.S. was puzzled. "I'm afraid I don't understand, Bellamy."

"Her captain, Peterson, sir, has gone sick. A relief is required. The Naval Secretary told me only this morning that I'd been selected."

A smile of pleasure crossed the Admiral's face. "My dear Bellamy," he said, "I do congratulate you. She's a damn fine ship. And nothing could give her a better start—or you for that matter—than a world cruise. I must say," he added, "I don't blame you for not being in any hurry to hoist Sir Robert's flag. He's a bit trying at times. Only don't, for heaven's sake, tell him I said so."

The connection between these three events—the demonstration of the untidy little Doctor's new Z weapon, the British Prime Minister and Foreign Secretary's statements concerning the revision of the Anglo-Egyptian Treaty, and the first cruise of the new battleship *Colossus*—is certainly not obvious. As we remarked at the beginning of this prologue, there was none at the time they occurred. This book reveals the circumstances in which they were brought together by the machinations of a single individual, a man whose mind had been warped by frustrated ambition and vanity, a man to whom evil was the only way of life he knew.

•

I

CAPTAIN HUXLEY-STANDISH, Royal Navy, who by virtue of his position as Naval Assistant to the Second Sea Lord was responsible for the appointments of officers to the King's ships, wrote the all-embracing word "Approved" on the sheet of paper which lay before him and added his signature. Then, with a sigh of mute resignation, he replaced the paper in its docket and put it in his "OUT" basket. He was about to tackle the next occupant of the "IN" basket when there was a knock on the door. As a man who loathed paper work at any time, but more particularly on a fine spring morning such as this, he welcomed the interruption.

"Come in," he called, laying down his pen, and removing his horn-rimmed glasses to wipe the lenses with the silk handkerchief from his breast pocket.

A uniformed Admiralty messenger entered the office and laid a small buff form on the desk. Without haste, the Naval Assistant replaced his spectacles, returned to his satisfaction the handkerchief to its rightful place, and arranged that portion which showed above the edge of the pocket. Then he turned his eyes downward.

"Oh, yes; Commander Browning! Is he here?"

"Waitin' houtside, sir."

"Good! Show him in."

Commander Peter James Browning, Royal Navy, who a moment later entered Captain Huxley-Standish's office, was neither objectionably handsome nor outstandingly ugly, in spite of a scar across his left cheek, which was a reminder, as much as the red and blue ribbon of the Distinguished Service Order on his left breast, of his participation in the never-to-be-forgotten affair off the Dunkirk beaches in 1940. Exposure to the weather rather than age—for he was barely thirty-seven—had lined his face across the forehead and beneath the eyes. But his

cheerful smile, an indication of the zest with which he faced life and his job, was curiously attractive—to men, be it added, as much as to women, for in the latter he seldom displayed interest; whence it might be reasonably deduced that he was a bachelor. A curiously muddled and immature philosophy persuaded him that wenching and work did not go hand in hand together. . . .

Captain Huxley-Standish looked up at his visitor and said: "Ah, good-morning, Browning."

"Good-morning, sir."

"Some time since we last met."

"Yes, sir; I think it was at Gib. in 'thirty-nine, when you were Commander of the *Resolution*."

"During the last combined fleet exercises before the War?"

"Yes, sir. Er—you wanted to see me about an appointment, sir?"

"Oh, yes, Browning. Let me see." Captain Huxley-Standish rummaged among a number of sheets of paper on his desk selecting one at which he glanced for a moment before continuing: "You've just finished home service leave after being in command of the *Terrier*."

Browning nodded his assent.

The Naval Assistant continued: "I suppose you're hoping for another ship. No, don't say anything." He looked at Peter Browning with a smile. "Ninety-nine per cent of the officers who enter this room come to ask for a ship; not only to ask, but to beg or even pray for one on their bended knees."

The eager look on Browning's face was sufficient answer to Captain Huxley-Standish's question. "Well, I'm afraid I must disappoint you," he went on. "We want you to go out to Alexandria."

Peter swallowed hard, in an endeavour to avoid showing his disappointment, before he asked: "What sort of a job, sir?"

"Pulgrave—Vice-Admiral Pulgrave—he's F.O.L.E.M.¹ now—has asked for a relief for Commander Drummond.

¹ Flag Officer Levant and Eastern Mediterranean.

Don't suppose you know him. Getting too old for the job apparently. Pulgrave has particularly asked for an energetic officer—one blessed with initiative, drive, and ability to get things done. That's the reason you've been selected."

Though this might be gratifying to Browning's vanity, he was fully aware that it was the sort of palliative offered by successive Naval Assistants in their endeavours to persuade officers to accept unpopular jobs. Wherefore he asked: "What sort of work is it, sir?"

"I can tell you this much. Though a staff job, you should get an occasional opportunity for more active work. As you know, the Middle East has never been exactly a peaceful part of the world. Turkey seems to have settled down lately, but in Greece, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt—well, one seldom opens one's morning paper without reading about some sort of trouble, even if it's only a student riot in Cairo or a Jewish outrage in Tel-Aviv. There are good reasons for this state of affairs: much is due to what one might call the emancipation of the Arab world. Given time, I don't doubt that it will all settle down. But there is always the danger of a major flare-up."

Peter Browning commented: "Surely we can hold things in check, sir. Our forces are in Palestine——"

Captain Huxley-Standish interrupted his visitor with a wave of his hand: "If the whole Arab world rose against us, Browning, our position would be extremely difficult, not to say intolerable. Remember, we're not a nation at war now, and our forces are limited. Besides, we must retain the good will of the rest of the world—America, Russia, and so on—in all our actions in the Middle East. In any local bust-up there is always the germ of a world war to-day."

"Too true, sir, but I don't see anything very secret in that."

"Hold on, Browning, I haven't finished yet."

"I'm sorry, sir."

"My point is this. There are certain individuals in this world to-day out for their own ends—you'll know the type I mean—to whom these incipient troubles in the Middle East are a heaven-sent opportunity. And what is more, we have information that at least one of them—a particularly slippery and dangerous customer—is already out there on the job. Exactly what he's up to we don't know. He may content himself with playing the Greek Right and Left wing parties off against each other. Or he may set the whole Arab world ablaze. He's enough material for it: the unpopularity of the French in Syria, the Jews versus the Arabs in Palestine, the Anglo-Egyptian treaty negotiations which start next week. But you can see the possibilities as well as I can."

"I do, sir; but I'm afraid I don't see where I come in."

Captain Huxley-Standish rose from his chair and walked over to the window to gaze out over St. James's Park. "You will," he said, "be responsible to F.O.L.E.M. for the conduct of all those special operations—most of them small ones by normal naval standards—which are necessary to keep the peace in the Eastern Mediterranean at this time. Maritime police work, it is really."

"You mean patrols off the coast to stop traffic in arms, illegal immigration, and so on, sir?"

"Exactly; and anything else which will stop the activities of gentlemen of the type I've just mentioned—some of it, incidentally, not very orthodox, but interesting, I imagine—yes, interesting."

The Naval Assistant suddenly turned to Peter Browning and said abruptly: "We want you to leave by air the day after to-morrow. Can you make it?"

"Yes, of course, sir," answered Peter with a wry smile. "If I must, I must. I've heard a great deal about the Middle East during recent years from one source or another, and none of it has made me exactly enthusiastic to go there; but perhaps it's better than it's painted. And that goes for the job, too, sir."

"Right, Browning. Then I'll wish you good luck."
"Thank you very much, sir."

Commander Peter Browning left England four days later. The Dakota of R.A.F. Transport Command brought him to earth at Cairo West airport shortly after dark on the second day out from the United Kingdom. An hour's bus drive brought him into the heart of Cairo and the Mecca of the tourist—Shepherd's Hotel. An hour later, bathed, and in his right mind after ridding himself of his travel-weary garments, he descended into the lounge and passed into the bar for a drink before dinner.

His eyes quickly scanned the polyglot collection of individuals occupying the bar before they rested on the only naval officer present. In three strides he was across the room and had clapped a hand upon that individual's shoulder.

"John, by all that's wonderful!" he exclaimed.
"What luck finding *you* here."

Lieutenant Commander John Prentice turned round slowly on his stool. Beneath fair, wavy hair there was a questioning look in his fresh young face which changed rapidly into a smile of delighted recognition.

"Peter! Fancy meeting you of all people here. Have a drink. Brandy and ginger ale's about the only drinkable poison available."

When the drinks arrived John raised his glass.
"Here's to you, Peter."

"To the good fortune which brought you here to-night," Browning answered. "I was afraid I'd have to spend the evening in my own company. I thought you were stationed in Alex."

"I am, though I come up to Cairo periodically. But what brings you to this part of the world?"

"I'm relieving a chap called Drummond."

"Drummond? Oh, you mean old Soso!"

"Soso?" queried Browning. "What's that?"

"Stands for Staff Officer Special Operations," said

Prentice. After glancing at his watch, he continued: "But look here, do you mind if we don't talk any more shop now? I've got a date, and time's getting on."

Browning uttered a groan. "Oh, John! So you're still after the fair sex, you impossible polygamist. I had thought we should be able to dine together."

"We can, old boy," John answered firmly, "and after that you're going to keep my date with me. You'll find it an entertaining one. Come in to dinner and I'll explain."

In the restaurant Browning said: "Now, John, let's hear what sort of a party you're trying to let me in for to-night."

His companion answered: "At half-past nine we're due at the Opera House. There's a new musical show on. We're going round backstage afterwards to see a friend of mine. The cast are giving a party. I was asked to come and bring any one else I cared to."

Browning sighed. "John, will you never reform as you grow older! You needn't tell me your friend is a female. I'm sure of it. And I thought stage-door johnnies were a thing of the past!"

With simulated irritation Prentice retorted: "If we were anywhere else than in a reputedly respectable hotel, Peter, I should start a rough house with you after that remark. Chorus girls are but an episode in my dim and distant past—"

"Dim is the word for it," Browning laughingly interjected, "but I'm not so sure about distant."

Prentice ignored the interruption. "It just happens," he said, "that I know somebody in an English company now visiting Egypt. And she's *not* in the chorus! She's a star. Been in musical shows—at the Palladium, and so on. And I know her because she was at school with my sister."

Browning groaned again: "Oh, John! You're not trying to put that one across *me*. It comes in the same category as the 'my wife doesn't understand me' stunt."

"It's the truth, Peter, whether you believe it or not. And she's quite charming."

"To you, old boy. I don't doubt that!"

Half an hour later Prentice and Browning walked into the stalls of Cairo's Opera House, remarkable as a building for being constructed entirely of wood and in reputation for the first production of Verdi's *Aida*. As they took their seats the house lights went down and the curtain rose. The show, which rejoiced in the name *Black and White*, though of the concert-party type, was considerably better than the average seaside variety to which one is accustomed in England. Perhaps it owed something to the London Co-Optimists of yesteryear and happy memories of the nineteen-twenties. But it also owed something to revue. It was artistic, decorative, and admirably produced. And principals, chorus, and orchestra played it for all they were worth, to the intense enjoyment of the large audience.

When it was all over, Prentice remarked: "We must give her twenty minutes to change before we go round. There's time to nip over to the Continental for a drink."

Seated in the lounge of the hotel he had named, Prentice turned to Browning and said: "Tell me, Peter, who did you like best in the show?"

Browning pondered a moment before replying. Doubtless he was expected to name the particular member of the fair sex who was the centre of John's easily bestowed affections. Unfortunately he hadn't the least idea which she was out of a baker's dozen. Wherefore he avoided the issue by naming a male. "I liked the chap who did those drawings," he said.

Since the reader may not have had the advantage of witnessing a performance given by Roger Stetson, it is necessary to describe, briefly, his act. He appeared upon the stage attired in a costume strongly reminiscent of that which is entirely appropriate to the role of Mephistopheles in Gounod's most popular work, and not inappropriate to the villain in a Christmas pantomime, but which was singularly irrelevant to this particular form of histrionic

entertainment. Having persuaded the orchestra to play a little soft music, "The Bells of St. Mary's"—but we'll let that pass—he turned to his props: an easel, to which was affixed a number of sheets of white paper. He explained that it was his intention to write on the paper, so that all could see, three single numerals suggested by the audience, and thereafter to transform the result into a picture, if not of surpassing beauty, at least of tolerable interest. After a little encouragement, one or two of the more vociferous individuals in the stalls or farther afield would name the necessary numbers, and Stetson, to the soothing strains of "Pistol Packin' Mama" (the orchestra having by this time tired of St. Mary's bells), would execute in coloured chalk on the basis of the given numbers a drawing which was a tolerable likeness of, say, Betty Grable.

He would then declare his intention of attempting the much more difficult feat of producing a drawing in the same way on the basis of a row of *four* numbers. He would have little difficulty in obtaining these from an audience now warmed to its work, and, to the orchestral strains of that monumental piece of musical bathos, "The Lost Chord," would execute an even greater piece of bathos in the form of a reproduction of one Sandy Macpherson seated one day at the organ. Finally, Mr. Stetson would call for further numbers in order to execute the *absolutely* impossible feat of producing *impromptu*, and within the compass of one chorus of "The British Grenadiers," a picture based on no less than five numbers in a row. He then earned, cheaply, great applause with a representation of a company of Grenadier Guards on parade.

This was the artist for whom Peter Browning expressed admiration in preference, apparently, to any one of the girls.

"Oh," replied the slightly nettled Prentice, "there wasn't much in that! Those drawings were already sketched in in pencil—invisible to the audience, of course

—on the sheets of paper. All Roger Stetson does is to copy them over."

"How on earth can he do it that way?" retorted Browning. "He doesn't know what numbers the audience are going to give him. Or is he gifted with second sight?"

"Second nothing!" said Prentice. "These acts in which the audience are asked to think of a number are all the same. They can always use prearranged figures whatever the audience sings out. It's like forcing a selected card on someone when you're doing a card trick."

"Well," reflected Browning, "I'm innocent enough to believe it was all quite genuine—that he just took *any* number which was suggested by the audience and drew entirely impromptu pictures. But I'm not going to argue, because we can't possibly prove who's right."

"That's just where you're wrong, Peter. The chap'll be at the party to-night, and we can ask him. I'll bet you a quid that my idea's correct."

"In that case," answered Browning with a laugh, "I'll take you. Talking of the party, isn't our twenty minutes' grace about up?"

The two friends drove across the wide Opera House square and down the side street which led to the stage door of the theatre. As their car came to rest, Prentice jumped out, remarking: "You stay here, Peter. I'll nip inside and find her."

A moment later Browning realised that Prentice was ushering into the back of the car someone—this inadequate description is due to the little he could see of her in the dark—who rejoiced, he gathered from a hurried introduction, in the name of Tania Maitland. And during the drive which occupied the next five minutes, despite his normal disinterested outlook on the female sex, he came to the conclusion, from her sweet musical voice and her delightful laughter, that there might be occasions when John Prentice picked a winner.

It appeared that he had already explained Browning's

intrusion into the pattern of the evening's activities, for she remarked to him: "My dear, after all that travelling you must be frightfully weary. It is nice of you to come along. Especially as I'm afraid you may not like the party. There'll be *such* a lot of people, and many of them will seem a bit theatrical to you—doing party pieces and so on."

"Party pieces," laughed Browning, "though possibly of a different character, are not unknown in a wardroom on guest night. Don't you bother about me. I'm sure I shall enjoy myself."

In making the last statement he was a reliable prophet. Tania alone was sufficient to ensure that for any man. Tall and slender, with hair of a colour which Browning found himself describing as pure spun gold rather than blonde, she was, in the soft glow of electric light, revealed as a quite unusually attractive creature. He guessed that she was on the right side of thirty. Though her appearance was such as to draw the attention of any man, her greater attraction was the extent to which she had remained unspoiled by the theatre. With versatility as an actress, an infectious sense of comedy, a charming soprano voice, and an ability to dance, not to mention legs which would have graced any pair of tights, she was undoubtedly the star of the *Black and White* Company. And outside the theatre she was as definitely good fun as she was a delight to the eye.

As for the party—but stop! Descriptions of parties at which one has not been present are inclined to be boring. They may, not infrequently, be dismissed briefly with the three words: dancing, drinking, and necking; so we'll skip a description of this one, particularly since it ran true to type save for a certain exuberant showing off by the lesser lights of the *Black and White* Company.

It was such a cheerful occasion that Peter Browning soon realised that he was enjoying himself immensely; this despite the fact that earlier in the evening he had felt distinctly tired after the long flight from England. Quite soon after their arrival, when Tania, Peter Browning,

and John Prentice were sitting together at a table in an alcove, the last-named member of the trio remarked:

"Before we forget, Peter, amidst all this junketing, what about settling that little wager of ours? I never bet on a certainty without making damned sure I get the money."

"O-kay, me lad," was the answer. "Let's find Roger Stetson, and ask Miss Maitland to introduce us."

Prentice turned to the girl, who sat on his left sipping a long glass of iced lime squash. "Will you do that for us, Tania dear?"

"Introduce you to our Roger Stetson?" she answered. "Why?"

Prentice explained.

"Well," she laughed when he had finished, "I don't think I ought to encourage you two to bet on anything so silly."

"Oh, come on," cried Prentice. "Be a sport."

Browning said quietly: "Please do, Miss Maitland."

"To be honest," she replied, "I don't particularly like our Master Stetson. In the theatre I have to put up with him, but outside it's different. I'd much rather not give him an excuse to join us to-night."

Prentice's face fell. "If you say so, Tania, that's that," he said; "but I must say I'm disappointed at not being able to make Peter pay up."

"You needn't be," she smiled. "I'm afraid Commander Browning will never forgive me, but as a matter of fact you win, John. Roger Stetson does use drawings which he's prepared beforehand—and previously selected numbers, too. I've seen him preparing his props before the show."

"My dear Tania, how can I thank you?" cried Prentice with mock gravity. More exuberantly he said: "Come on, Peter, hand over!"

With a smile Browning passed a note across the table to his friend. "Don't spend all at once, you old rogue," he said. Turning to the girl he continued: "So Roger

Stetson is not exactly a pleasant individual, eh, Miss Maitland?"

"Oh, I don't want to go so far as to say that," she replied. "I don't happen to like him, that's all. He's a bit of a nuisance at times."

From the change in the tone of her voice when she made this last remark, Browning could surmise the probable reason for her dislike of Roger Stetson. But since he had only met her that evening for the first time, it would not have been tactful to pursue the matter further.

Wherefore he commented: "I am content to abide by your judgment, Miss Maitland. I must make a note to be chary of the gentleman should I ever meet him." As an afterthought he added: "By the way, what exactly does he look like out of that satanic fancy dress of his? It must be a pretty good disguise, because I haven't noticed any one here to-night whom I should have thought was Roger Stetson."

John Prentice supplied the answer. "That," he said, waving his cigarette in the direction of the other side of the room, "is Stetson standing by the staircase."

Browning looked across the room. A very fair-haired, rather small individual, with a sullen expression and a cigarette drooping from his lower lip, was leaning nonchalantly against the wall. He had the air of one who is as pleased with himself as he is bored with life.

Browning commented: "Not a pleasant individual, I fancy. Damn it all, I do believe he's coming over here." His remark was prompted as much by the distinct stare which Stetson cast in their direction as the way in which he suddenly hove himself away from the wall, and, hands in pockets, slouched across the room.

Ignoring both Browning and Prentice, he said: "This dance, Tania darling." Even allowing for a certain tendency among theatre people to use that term of endearment freely, no one could fail to take objection to the tone of self-satisfied assumption in Stetson's voice.

Tania answered, perhaps a little coldly, but certainly

politely: "I'm afraid not, Roger. I'm dancing this one with Lieutenant-Commander Prentice."

Stetson was a little too obviously displeased by this reply, but he only said: "The next, then."

Browning came to the rescue. "That's ours, isn't it, Miss Maitland?"

Perhaps it was the sweet smile with which she thanked him for that remark which prompted his next. For when Stetson persisted and said rudely: "Very well, the one after then, and don't forget", Peter interjected: "If you talk like that, my friend, Miss Maitland won't dance with you at all to-night."

Roger Stetson's eyes flashed. He pulled his hands abruptly out of his pockets. From this gesture and the look of hatred which passed across his face, Browning thought for one moment that Stetson was about to strike him. But the storm passed. He turned suddenly on his heel and, without a word, walked away.

Prentice commented: "Well done, Peter! I'm afraid he's a bit of a bounder."

Browning laughed. "Only a bit of a bounder? I should say he was definitely a cad, old boy."

Tania finished the matter by remarking: "Let's forget about Roger Stetson and dance."

It was close on four in the morning when the two men said good-night to their fair and lovely companion. Prentice had long ago dismissed his car, and since no taxis or other means of transport were readily available at that time of the night, they decided to walk back to Shepherd's. As Browning remarked: "It'll do us no harm to have a breath of air before we turn in."

But they very nearly had more than a breath of fresh air. They were half-way down the broad street which leads to Opera Square when they saw the headlights of a car coming erratically towards them. Prentice observed: "Judging from his zigzag course, Peter, the driver of yon automobile has had more than one over the eight."

"If he continues like that," said Browning, "he'll

never reach home to-night. It's only a question of time before he hits something. He's going a damn' sight too fast, anyway."

Then it all happened very quickly. The approaching car, which had been wandering from side to side of the broad thoroughfare, had nearly reached the two officers when it swerved right across on to the pavement along which they were walking.

Almost simultaneously they realised their danger. Prentice cried out: "Christmas! Look out, Peter!" even as Browning yelled: "Jump, John!"

They did jump, both of them, just in time, into the doorway of a shop, the speeding car missing them by inches.

"Phew," said Prentice, breathing heavily, "that was a near one! A joke's a joke and all that, but that's a bit too much. The bloody fool will kill someone before he's finished—if he doesn't kill himself first."

Browning was staring down the road in the direction of the retreating car, whose red light was almost out of sight.

"I don't think he'll do that, old boy," he said. Something in the tone of his voice made Prentice ask: "What do you mean, Peter?"

"Perhaps you didn't notice that that car drove perfectly straight after it had passed us, John."

"No, Peter."

"Well, it's highly suggestive, and confirms the fleeting impression which I got as it swerved into us, that the man at the wheel was our friend Roger Stetson."

"But, good God, Peter, you don't mean he was trying to do us in deliberately!"

Browning answered: "I'm not saying so for certain, John. But we didn't make ourselves exactly popular with him to-night. To put it vulgarly, he has a distinct pash on Tania. And we rather spiked his guns."

Prentice retorted: "Granted all that, Peter; but in the name of heaven, it surely wasn't enough to make the man want to commit murder!"

"I shouldn't have thought so, John. I'm just wondering whether there could be any other reason."

Prentice broke the tension with a laugh. "Oh, come, Peter," he said, "you're imagining things. What on earth reason could there be?"

"God alone knows," answered Browning. "Anyway, standing here won't tell us. Let's get back to bed."

II

COMMANDER PETER BROWNING lost no time after his arrival at Alexandria, where the Navy has its Eastern Mediterranean Headquarters, in taking over his job as Staff Officer Special Operations. Standing by the side of his soon-to-be-predecessor, Commander Drummond, he was studying a large-scale map of the Eastern Mediterranean.

Drummond was speaking. "The best thing I can do is to give you a general run round the set-up of this part of the world first," he said, gesticulating at the map with his pipe. "We'll go into details afterwards."

"Go ahead," answered Browning.

"Here's the area for which we're responsible—all the Mediterranean east of the Adriatic. In the south-western corner we have Cyrenaica and the Western Desert. All quiet there nowadays. . . . To the east of Alexandria is the Canal, with Port Said at one end and Suez and Port Tewfik at the other. Turning northwards into Palestine, here is Haifa, a good port, and important as the terminus of one of the pipe-lines from the Iranian oilfields. I won't enlarge on the situation in that country except to say that the Jew-versus-Arab problem seems to be very like the proverbial irresistible force meeting an immovable object. And, until it's solved, there will always be plenty of work to do keeping the peace.

"North, again, is Syria, with a good port at Beirut, and a smaller one, also terminus of an oil pipe-line, at Tripoli. The internal situation there is likewise not all

that it might be. The Lebanese do not exactly see eye to eye with the French, and when there's trouble between the two, depend upon it, the British Navy is called in to act as referee. Next place we come to is Cyprus, peaceful enough now, but not beyond breaking out into civil disturbances now and again. Turkey seems to be about the one bright spot on this part of the map. They're a bit frightened of Russian designs—whether justifiably is another matter. As a result, they're only too keen to keep on our right side. We can depend on their co-operation in most things—even in activities which are not as legal as they might be."

"Why," asked Browning, "should we want to indulge in illegal activities? Damn it all, we're at peace now. It was quite different during the war, when the Hun was in full control of Greece, Crete, the Aegean and Dodecanese Islands."

"The Hun," answered Drummond, "has left us a nice little legacy of trouble in that part of the world. All Greeks don't see eye to eye with other Greeks. Being a democracy, there's no reason why they should . . . only, unfortunately, it seems to be a tenet of Greek philosophy that if you don't, to use an Americanism, rub out the chap who disagrees with your point of view, he will certainly do the same to you. At the present time loyalties are sharply divided between the E.P.I.R.E.S. and the rest. Don't ask me what the initials stand for; I can never remember for two minutes running, any more than I can remember whether they're Left wing or Right. Never had any time for politics myself. Live and let live has always been my motto. Pity a few more people in this world haven't that outlook——"

"Yes, quite," interrupted Browning. "But you were talking about the E.P.I.R.E.S."

"Oh, yes!" Drummond jabbed the stem of his pipe down on the chart so that it covered the western end of Crete. "The situation to-day is that the E.P.I.R.E.S. have established themselves in strength in Crete, where they're in a majority. By our standards they're no more

than brigands, but they are armed. In fact they've considerable stocks of weapons and ammunition, *and* they've a few units of the Greek Navy with 'em—a couple of corvettes and submarines. At the moment there's an uneasy peace between the E.P.I.R.E.S. and the Greek Government proper. And just like elsewhere these days, the British are in the uneasy position, willy-nilly, of acting as referee . . . with, incidentally, a ninety-nine per cent certainty of earning the odium of both sides, and most of the rest of the world, whatever we do."

Peter Browning remarked: "Right. . . . Now suppose we come down to earth for a bit, and you tell me exactly what the Navy has to do as a result of this riot of political and national ideologies?"

"Chiefly patrols to stop gun-running, to enforce the immigration laws and anti-piracy," replied Drummond, "though there are sometimes other operations—the illegal ones I referred to earlier."

"Anti-piracy?" queried Browning. "I thought one only met that sort of thing in China."

"Don't forget the E.P.I.R.E.S. own a bit of a navy, old boy. They've twice hindered the free passage of British merchant ships on the high seas. But, look here; talking's dry work, and I've done enough for now. As we do much of this work with Coastal Forces—M.L.s, M.T.B.s and the like—I'm going to send you down to the Coastal Forces Base now, where C.F.E. will put you right in the picture."

Twenty minutes in a staff car along the winding Corniche, past Stanley Bay, Mustapha Barracks, and the now silted-up eastern harbour, brought Browning to Ras-el-Tin. Hard by this old red-bricked fortress, tucked away in one corner of the harbour, was the home of the "little ships." Alongside a couple of jetties were the large streamlined M.T.B.s, capable of forty knots; the slower M.G.B.s, with their more powerful gun armament; the hundred-and-ten-foot sea-going type M.L.s.

Browning was greeted by a smiling, red-faced officer of the same rank as himself. An Irishman from County

Cork, he rejoiced in the name of O'Leary, and the title—initials being inevitable in the Service—of C.F.E.

"So you're the chap who's relieving Drummond," he said. "You're very welcome. And you're very lucky. You sail to-night."

"I beg your pardon," said Browning with justifiable astonishment. "I *what* to-night?"

"Seems that Drummond hasn't told you about your trip."

"You're right there."

"Ah, well, I'll have to explain," said O'Leary.

"Drummond reckoned that the best thing you could do before taking over his job was to go for a run in one of my craft. There's one due to sail to-night on a Crete patrol. Only a three-day trip. Don't suppose there'll be any excitement, but you never know. Can you make it?"

"Of course I can," laughed Browning, "though it's a bit sudden."

"Never mind about that. You may not have another opportunity. Be down here at five. Don't bring any more gear than you must; but remember, it can be devilish cold at night."

"I'll be there," replied Browning, "with only a greatcoat and toothbrush."

"Good! Now I'll show you around the base, and then we'll go up to the mess and have a gin before lunch."

Lieutenant Commander John Prentice occupied the position of Signal Officer on the staff of the Admiral at Alexandria. He was Peter Browning's junior by some four years. There was about him a suspicion of that "naice" appearance which is the prerogative of all naval signal officers consequent on time served as flag lieutenant, an appointment in which social duties play a considerable part. Though one hastens to add that, in Prentice's case, the result was far from that poodle-faking type so beloved of writers of fiction, and even of the female sex, old as well as young. He was invariably

irresistibly cheerful. Superficially he appeared to regard life as one huge jest; but those who, like Browning, knew him well, were aware that beneath this façade of irresponsibility was a simple and sincere spirit, and, if he never seemed to do any work, he achieved, in fact, far more than many.

When, on this particular morning, he made a slightly belated appearance in his office, consequent on the inherent difficulty he experienced in turning out in the morning, he commented cheerfully to no one in particular: "As a disturber of the peace, as a device guaranteed to interrupt whatever one is doing at the worst possible moment, I have frequently consigned the telephone and its works to the devil. But there are occasions when it's uncommonly useful."

The W.R.N.S. Duty Signal Officer smiled to herself. She guessed the implication of her "boss's" remark. But she knew well that the hour was too early for any one with only a single blue stripe upon each sleeve to voice the cynical comment which came into her mind. She contented herself with a slight lift of the eyebrows when, a few minutes later, she heard Prentice's voice on the telephone:

"Trunks, please," he said.

"Okey-doke."

"Operator dear, that is a terrible expression. At any other time I should run you in to the supervisor, but this is a special occasion, so you'll get away with it."

Most of this was wasted on the A.T.S. switchboard operator. She had already put the connection through to the civil trunk exchange, whence a puzzled Egyptian operator interjected in English, coloured by a marked foreign accent: "What is it you want?"

"Oh, sorry," replied Prentice. "Cairo 95372."

"One moment, please."

There was a pause, and then a girl's voice came down the line:

"Hallo."

"Can I speak to Miss Maitland, please?"

"Miss Maitland speaking."

"Oh, Tania, my dear. It's John speaking. Sorry to call you out of bed so early."

There was a gurgle of laughter from Cairo, and then in mock seriousness: "You know perfectly well, John *dear*, that I'm always up by this time. If you make any more remarks like that I shall ring off."

"Sorry, my dear, but you mustn't pay any attention to my little jokes. The important thing is that I've seen the good news in this morning's paper. Here it is: 'Alhambra Theatre, Alexandria. All next week. Every evening at 9.30 p.m.' Somebody with an unpronounceable name presents *Black and White*, featuring my dear Tania, and so on. That's tremendous news."

She had no intention of paralleling his enthusiasm at once. She replied in a matter-of-fact tone: "Yes; it will be a welcome change after Cairo. It'll be nice to bathe in the sea every day."

John groaned: "Is that the only reason you want to come to Alex. Don't you want to see little me?"

"Well, if you're very good, I *might* manage to see you a *teeny-weeny* bit."

John bridled. "Tania, my dear, you're being quite beastly this morning. If you aren't careful I shall ring off."

She replied soothingly: "John *dear*, you *mustn't* rise as early as this. I promise I'll be good. Go on."

His natural high spirits returned. "Listen. Instead of staying in some beastly hotel when you're here, why not come and stay in my house? There's only Peter—that's Commander Browning, whom you met the other night. We'll look after you and guarantee you're comfortable."

"John, how sweet of you, but I can't come and stay in a house with just two men. What about my reputation? I know this is the Middle East, *but*——"

"Damn," interrupted John. "I always forget that sort of thing. Half a moment. I know! I'll ask Joan, my Wren cousin, to come and stay too. She has to live

in quarters normally, but I'm sure the head Wren will let her sleep out for a week. My moral reputation's pretty high!"

"If you can fix that, John dear, I shall be delighted to come. I've had enough of bug-ridden hotel beds."

"That's marvellous. I'll get on to Joan right away."

"Can do, John. Thank you so much."

Prentice replaced the receiver, and turned to the task of reading through the pile of signals which had come in during the night. But he had hardly started when he was interrupted by the appearance of the Warrant Telegraphist on his staff in the doorway of his office.

Prentice looked up at the tubby little individual whose ruddy face perspired freely. "Morning, Mr. Gardiner," he said.

"If you please, sir, we've lost touch with Whitehall again. The same station as has interfered with Service twenty-nine for the last four mornings is on again. Same time too, sir. You wanted to hear it, sir."

"I'll come along right away."

Prentice rose from his desk and followed the Warrant Telegraphist into an adjoining room. This, the receiving portion of the Alexandria Naval Wireless Station, was a large and lofty yellow-washed compartment. Along all four sides ran desks, on which were mounted receivers. At each set was an operator wearing headphones. Some were men, others Wrens. In the centre, seated at a large flat-topped desk covered with trays filled with flimsy sheets of paper, were the Petty Officer in charge of the watch and the two ratings who assisted him in handling the many hundreds of messages which were sent and received from this room in every twenty-four hours to and from the Admiralty, other shore authorities at home and abroad, and ships at sea.

The Warrant Telegraphist led Prentice direct to one of the Wren operators, who, from the way she was clasping her headphones tightly over her ears with both hands, was clearly having difficulty in reading the signals with which she was concerned. Prentice plugged an additional pair

of headphones in to the receiver and put them over his head.

"Humph," he said after a moment's pause, "impossible to read anything through that!" He made a few adjustments to the controls of the receiver. "It's strong enough to blot out anything over a considerable band, too."

Mr. Gardiner commented: "They've no right to be operating on that frequency, sir."

"No, of course not; but we can't do much about it until we know who they are."

"That's the trouble, sir. There's no call-sign to identify 'em by. Each day it's the same. Just three groups of figures transmitted over and over again for a quarter of an hour, starting at ten o'clock."

Prentice removed his headphones. "Have you a record of these figures, Mr. Gardiner?" he asked.

"Yes, sir." The Warrant Officer drew a sheet of paper from his breast pocket and unfolded it. "Here they are."

Prentice took the paper and looked at the figures:

<i>27th May</i>	<i>197</i>	<i>4562</i>	<i>89735</i>
<i>28th May</i>	<i>284</i>	<i>9731</i>	<i>57642</i>
<i>29th May</i>	<i>392</i>	<i>2563</i>	<i>28795</i>
<i>30th May</i>	<i>475</i>	<i>4589</i>	<i>67532</i>
<i>31st May</i>	<i>563</i>	<i>7621</i>	<i>17987</i>

A puzzled frown crossed his face. "I don't quite understand," he said. "Do you mean to say, Mr. Gardiner, that the day before yesterday, for example, this station did nothing but transmit this row of figures: 392, 2563, 28795?"

"Yes, sir. Just repeated over and over again. It's always like that. Different figures each day but always in three groups—one of three figures, one of four, and one of five."

"Well," answered Prentice, rubbing his cheek with the fingers of the right hand, "I'm damned if I can make

head or tail of 'em"—he paused—"except for one thing. Did you notice the first figures?"

The Warrant Telegraphist answered him slowly: "You mean the way they run in series? Yes, sir. Assuming the whole thing's some form of coded message, I thought maybe they was numbered like that, so that the receiving station could keep a check on 'em."

"It's a possibility, but it must be a damn queer code. You can't say much with only three groups, can you? One of three figures—like this one, 392; one of four, like this one, 2563——"

John Prentice's voice tailed slowly off. It was clear that some sudden thought had struck him.

"That's queer," he said, speaking half to himself. "Such an arrangement of figures rings a bell somewhere in the back of my memory." Realising that Mr. Gardiner had overheard his last remark, he continued slowly: "I've a feeling that I've seen these particular groups before—the ones you received on the 29th, the day before yesterday, when I was in Cairo—but I'm blowed if I can remember where."

Mr. Gardiner asked with interest: "What about the others, sir?"

"No, not the others. But in any case it may only be some coincidence. Whatever it is I'm thinking of, I expect it'll come back to me later on to-day. I'll let you know if it does."

The Wren Telegraphist, whose work had been interrupted by the interfering signals from this unidentified station, suddenly remarked: "It's stopped, sir."

Prentice reached a decision. He said: "Mr. Gardiner, since we can't identify the interfering station, we must get a D/F¹ fix of it to-morrow. As soon as you're satisfied that we're in touch with Whitehall again, come into my office, and we'll draft out a signal to our D/F stations telling 'em what we want."

"Aye, aye, sir."

As Prentice left the receiving-room his mind reverted

¹ Wireless Direction-finding.

to the strange groups of numbers transmitted by the unknown station. "Where on earth," he thought to himself, "*have* I seen or heard those queer signals before, or am I only dreaming that I have?" Memory vouchsafed no answer by the time he had seated himself at his desk, where once again he turned to the task of reading the pile of signals which had come in during the night.

Whilst Peter Browning visited the Coastal Force Base and John Prentice dispatched instructions to a group of three D/F stations to take bearings of the unknown offending transmitting station, the regular weekly meeting of the heads of the three Fighting Services in the Middle East was taking place in Cairo.

There were only six officers present at the meeting, apart from the major who acted as secretary. At the head of the table, presiding on this occasion, was the military Commander-in-Chief, Sir Reginald Attwater, a humourless martinet, with a dark waxed moustache. On his left sat the A.O.C.-in-C., Air Vice-Marshal Risk, a relatively young and obviously enthusiastic leader of the junior Service. On his other side was the big sturdy figure of Vice-Admiral Pulgrave, naval commander in the Eastern Mediterranean. The other three officers, one from each Service, were staff officers responsible to their respective masters for all those matters which come under the generic title of "Plans."

The G.O.C.-in-C. was speaking: "Well, gentlemen," he said, gazing through his pince-nez at the assembled gathering, "that completes our agenda for this morning apart from 'Any other business.'" He turned to his right. "Have you anything else, Pulgrave?"

The Admiral gazed at the ceiling for a moment before replying: "A small point," he said. "The draft of the new treaty. My staff have finished vetting it. Apart from a few minor points, we've no amendments to suggest. I hope to be able to let you have it back early next week."

"Good," replied the General. "I gather the A.O.C. has only one or two small points he wants altered. We should be able to deal with them all at our meeting next week. I must say," he continued, "that I shall be glad when this treaty is finally settled. I dreamed about the thing last night—that somehow the press got hold of a copy of the draft and published it. Then the fat was properly in the fire. The Egyptian Government found itself hopelessly embarrassed by an opposition who clamoured that the new treaty was by no means what the people wanted. Riots and bloodshed followed. Fortunately at that point I woke up."

"I trust," commented Admiral Pulgrave, "that your dream is not prophetic. There are certain individuals in the world to-day—no names, no pack drill—waiting for just such an opportunity to stir up trouble in this particular quarter of the globe. And one way of doing it would certainly be to obtain a copy of the draft of this treaty."

The A.O.C. remarked sombrely: "What Pulgrave says is quite true. However, we're taking all possible precautions against such an eventuality even to the extent of——"

General Attwater interrupted him: "I think, perhaps, we won't discuss that here, Risk. The less said about such a piratical exploit the better. When does the party sail, by the way, Pulgrave?"

"This evening."

"Good!"

The General pushed his chair back from the table and rose to his feet.

"I see," he said, "that it's nearly one o'clock. As I have a luncheon engagement, I must be going."

Following the General's example, all the other officers rose to their feet, the three subordinates hurriedly gathering together the various documents on the table.

As the three senior officers were walking out of the room the Admiral said: "By the way, Attwater, our new battleship, the *Colossus*, is due at Alexandria in a

few days' time. She's on her way East on a world cruise. I should like to show you round. Can you manage to come down one day next week? I'll ask her captain to arrange lunch aboard."

The General answered: "I shall be very pleased to come, Pulgrave."

"Good!" answered the Admiral. "What about you, Risk?"

"Of course I'll come."

"Then that's fixed. I'll let you know the date later."

On which note of inter-service co-operation the three senior officers passed out of the conference-room.

III

AS NIGHT FELL upon the Eastern Mediterranean, His Majesty's Motor Launch No. 683, steering a course a little to the west of north, was making a good fifteen knots in the direction of her objective, Plaka Bay, on the southern coast of Crete.

Twenty-four hours earlier the vessel, little more than a hundred feet in length, had cast off from the Coastal Forces Base at Alexandria, threaded her way through the concourse of shipping lying in the harbour into the main channel, passed down between the lines of cruisers, frigates, and destroyers, glided through the gap between the breakwaters, and turned her bows into the Great Pass towards the open sea.

In the darkness, four men stood in a group on the bridge. To port was a bearded able seaman acting as look-out; to starboard, the slight figure of a sub-lieutenant, who, not without pride in view of his youth, answered to the sobriquet of "Number One." Between them, his feet apart to better stand steady as the vessel occasionally rolled to the sea, his arms resting on the bridge rail, his sturdy figure hidden in a duffel coat, was the commanding officer, a young lieutenant of twenty-three summers. And a little behind these three stood their "passenger," Commander Peter Browning.

The young Captain turned towards him: "Well, sir, so far so good," he said. "The heavens are graced by the glittering dust of the stars, but the moon shows no sign of its watery rays. Rotten," he muttered; "there ought to be a verse in that, but it neither scans nor rhymes."

In quieter moments, when the grim realities of life permitted, the young man was a poet; an art which, despite its æsthetic reputation, is by no means abhorrent to men of war.

"In more practical words, sir," he continued, "it's an ideal night for the job. No moon, but just enough light from the stars to give us that confident feeling that we can see where we're going even if, in fact, we can't."

"What about the weather?" asked Browning.

"Couldn't be better, sir. A calm sea is best for these trips. We have to reduce speed too much for my liking if there's anything like a lop on. And even then these craft are damnably wet and uncomfortable."

"What time do you reckon to make the rendezvous?"

"Midnight, sir. That gives us plenty of time to get away again before dawn. We've strict orders not to be sighted either from the shore or by any E.P.I.R.E.S. craft which may be on a coastal patrol."

"I can understand that," commented Browning.

"I suggest getting your head down for a couple of hours, sir, whilst the going's good. One never knows on this sort of job when one will have another chance of doing so."

"Perhaps you're right, me lad," smiled Browning, "maybe I will; but I want to have a yarn with the soldiers first. Send someone down to let me know when it's nearing midnight."

"Aye, aye, sir. 'Night sank upon the dusky head and on the purple sea; such night in Crete there ne'er had been, nor e'er again shall be.'"

"You can't get away with the impression that you wrote *that*," laughed Browning.

"Blast!" muttered the budding poet to himself before adding aloud, "See you later, sir."

His eyes accustomed to the darkness, Browning had little difficulty in finding his way aft over the various small obstructions which cluttered the upper deck to the hatchway, which led down through a small lobby into the wardroom. It was furnished after the manner of a yacht, with a settee bunk along each side, leaving just room for a table with folding leaves between.

The atmosphere of the tiny compartment was blue with the fumes rising from the pipes of the two occupants,

Gerald Chester and Michael Loxby. Attired in khaki shirts and slacks, they were studying intently a large-scale map and a number of aerial photographs laid out before them on the table. By their shoulder insignia, the one was labelled as a major in the Coldstream, the other a subaltern in the Rifle Brigade. But for the moment the regiments to which they owed allegiance were of little import. For more than a year these officers had been seconded for duty with Force 292, a conveniently meaningless tally, which encompassed all those from the three Services who were employed on such special operations as that on which they were now engaged.

As Browning entered the wardroom, both these officers looked up. Loxby, easily distinguished by his youthful features, half-rose in deference to Browning's rank and murmured: "Good evening, sir."

The other, with face bronzed by long exposure to the desert sun, bushy eyebrows, and moustache, announced heartily: "Sorry about the fug, but Loxby will smoke what smells uncommonly like brown paper."

"Not at all, sir. It's Hornby's No. One mixture."

"I know. You found a tin on the beach at Tobruk, and it was still as fresh as the day it was made. See the adverts. I suppose you get paid for writing them. Fresh, my foot!"

Browning sat down on the vacant settee and lit a cigarette. He said: "As you know, Chester, I'm new out here, and have only come on this trip to see how the wheels go round. I should be most grateful if you'd give me an idea of what you're going to do."

"By all means," answered the soldier. "Loxby and I were having a final look at the place where we're going to land to-night, to refresh our memories. Here's the spot."

He moved the map across the table towards Browning and placed his finger on Plaka Bay.

"And here," he continued, passing across a photograph, "is an aerial view of the place. It's hardly more than a cove, with a patch of shingle beach. Inshore

there's fairly densely wooded ground sloping upwards rapidly. It's an ideal place for us, since there's plenty of cover within a few yards of the sea."

The younger soldier uttered a deprecatory cough and said: "Whilst you're telling Commander Browning about this, I'll go up and get our dinghy ready."

"Yes, good idea, Loxby," answered his senior. To Browning he continued: "It's an inflatable rubber affair, like the type carried in aircraft for rescue purposes."

"There are just two of you in the party?" asked Browning.

"Yes, only Loxby and myself. About a mile from Crete we reduce speed and approach the island dead slow. That gives the skipper a chance of checking his navigation and to make sure that we don't give ourselves away by the noise of the engines. We stop about a hundred yards from the beach and listen for a while—again to make sure there's nobody ashore taking an unhealthy interest in us. Then, all being well, we put the rubber dinghy into the water and thereby propel ourselves and our stores—wireless set, food, and so on—ashore. It'll take three trips to do the lot."

"I've got the idea," nodded Browning, the light of enthusiastic interest illuminating his features. "Now tell me, what sort of a job are——"

The remainder of his words were drowned by the crash of a heavy body falling on the deck above, a muffled groan from someone in sudden pain, and a series of hearty "damns" and other expletives. Both Browning and Chester jumped up, the latter snapping: "What on earth is young Loxby up to? I'd better see if he wants help."

The Major disappeared up the ladder, and Browning could hear his footsteps moving about on the deck overhead. Presently he heard his voice call down the hatch. "I say, Browning, Loxby's hurt himself. Can you give a hand to help him below?"

"Of course," Browning responded readily. "What's the trouble?"

"I'm afraid I've sprained my ankle badly, sir," answered Michael Loxby, his face pale, as much from shock as pain, as the two officers assisted him down the ladder into the wardroom and on to one of the settees. "I'd just finished inflating the dinghy, and was coming aft when I tripped over something on the deck."

"Sorry about that. A sprain is a nasty thing. Let's have a look at it."

He helped the young officer remove his shoe and sock. There were already the signs of a painful bruise and swelling. As Browning touched it lightly, Loxby involuntarily withdrew his foot a little.

"It's pretty painful," he muttered through clenched teeth. "I'm not surprised," answered Browning, "but a cold compress will ease it. I wonder where they keep the first-aid kit in this craft. I'll go up and ask the skipper."

As he left the wardroom, Major Chester said: "Well, young Loxby, I'm afraid this means you can't come ashore to-night. You'll have to lie up for at least a week with that foot."

Loxby glanced up with a look of dismay. "But I must, simply must," he pleaded. "You can't possibly do the job alone. I can't let you down like this."

"It's not a case of letting me down. It's a damned nuisance, but it's not your fault. I'm going up to tell the Captain that the party's off."

Browning, returning from his mission to the bridge, entered the compartment half-way through the elder soldier's last remark. He inquired at once: "What's this about calling the show off, Chester?"

"Loxby obviously can't go ashore like this," was the answer, "and the job is more than I can tackle alone."

Browning reflected for a moment. Then he said: "Hold on a jiffy before you make any decision about turning back. Give me a hand with Loxby's ankle. I'm not much of a fist at putting a bandage on."

First aid completed, Chester asked sympathetically: "How's that, Loxby?"

"Feels much easier," was the grateful reply.

"Good" said Browning. "Now, Chester, I've an idea which might solve your problem. Mind you, I'm not saying it's an acceptable one. You're in charge of this, not me. But what do you say to me taking Loxby's place?"

Chester looked at him in evident surprise: "You're not serious," he said.

"I most certainly am," answered Browning firmly. "I know I'm no soldier, and may well be more of a hindrance than a help. But I'm at your disposal. And, of course, I'll waive my rank and put myself entirely under your orders."

"That's very sporting of you," said Chester admiringly. "And it's a damn' good idea." After a moment's pause he added: "I shall be most grateful if you'll come."

"Then that's settled," said Browning, with more confidence than he felt. "And, observing it's nearly ten o'clock, we'd better make the best possible use of the next hour with a rehearsal of my forthcoming duties. Bear in mind I've very little idea of what you're going to do when you're ashore. When the Germans were in occupation, you'd have been going to pinch a couple of Huns——"

Chester interrupted him: "True," he said. "We even pinched a blooming General once!"

"But," continued Browning, "that sort of thing doesn't make sense nowadays."

"Oh, yes, it does, more or less," replied Chester, "only it's the E.P.I.R.E.S. now. I know it sounds highly irregular for members of the British Forces to be invading the territory of a country with whom we're at peace with the object of pinching somebody. That's why we're being so secretive about the show. The fewer the people who know the better. Heaven help the British Government if the Press get hold of the yarn. In fact, we're more than justified; we must put Greece on her feet again. They haven't the forces to winkle the E.P.I.R.E.S. out of their Cretan stronghold. The great

British public would never stand for us sending troops to Crete to do it. So great minds have thought out a better solution. The real strength of the E.P.I.R.E.S. lies in the gent who leads 'em. Our job is to kidnap him. If we succeed, we hope the rebels will collapse like a pricked balloon."

Peter Browning remarked with enthusiasm: "That's a most refreshing way of dealing with a difficult problem. I can think of quite a number of other individuals whose only mission seems to be to cause trouble in the world. If only *they* could all be shanghaied away to some uninhabited island and left to inflict their unpleasantness on each other."

"Unfortunately," said Chester with a wry smile, "*that* would be undemocratic."

"And equally unfortunately," retorted Browning, "modern democracy has become confused with a policy of encouraging mediocrity and cranks and suppressing ability and common sense. However, I mustn't get on a soap-box now. There isn't time."

The two officers sat down at the table and began to pore over the map and photographs. They were still at it when the M.L.'s Number One came down the ladder.

"It's just after eleven-thirty, sir," he reported.

"Very good," acknowledged Browning. To Chester he added: "I think I understood all that. How about going up on deck now?"

"You go ahead," answered Chester; "I'll follow you in a moment."

Pausing only to say a word of sympathy to the injured Loxby and to receive in return sincere wishes of good luck, which were the more appreciated since he knew with what chagrin the young soldier must be regretting his inability to take part in the venture, Browning left the wardroom and climbed the ladder to the upper deck. He paused to accustom his eyes to the darkness before cautiously wending his way forward to the bridge. Look-out, First Lieutenant, and Captain were in the same positions he had left them some hours earlier.

He heard the voice of the Captain: "Slow both engines."

"Both engines going slow ahead," came the answering voice up the voicepipe from the wheelhouse.

"It's twenty to twelve," commented the Captain to no one in particular. "We're nearly there, unless our dead reckoning's out."

The eyes of every one of the men on the bridge endeavoured to pierce the darkness ahead. The island of Crete was just visible as a deep black mass against the star-spangled sky. The throb of the boat's engines had died away to almost nothing. The night was strangely silent and very still. The M.L. continued to glide ahead. There was no sign of a light ashore nor sound of human activity.

Gerald Chester joined the group on the bridge. "Is the coast clear, Skipper?" he asked.

"Looks like it," was the answer. Then followed the order: "Stop engines."

The motor launch came to rest. There was complete silence now, save for the sound of water lapping gently against the boat's hull. The black, forbidding silhouette of mountainous Crete was very close. Those on the bridge, who stared so intently at it, fancied they could hear the rustling of the night air in the olive trees which they knew must cover the foothills which rose steeply up from the foreshore.

"O.K.," said the Captain at last. "Out dinghy."

Manhandled by three young seamen, the rubber dinghy was placed gently over the side and into the water.

"I'll go first," said Chester. "You follow. Good-night, Skipper. Many thanks for the trip."

"Good-night, sir—good luck."

The Major climbed into the dinghy. As Browning turned to follow, the young Captain said: "Good-night and good luck to you, sir."

"Thanks," said Browning. "Tell C.F.E. when you get back what's happened, and ask him to let the Admiral know."

"Aye, aye, sir."

A moment later Commander Peter Browning and Major Gerald Chester were paddling their dinghy in silence towards the shore, and what seemed to one member of the party at least, the darkness of the unknown.

Suda Bay is a long and comparatively narrow inlet near the north-western end of the island of Crete. The surrounding land, sloping upward first to the foothills and then to the mountains of the interior, is partly cultivated, partly covered with shrub and occasional trees. For a while in 1941, this harbour, which forms a safe anchorage for a not inconsiderable number of ships, had served as an advance base for the British fleet. The half-sunken hull of the cruiser *York*, which was put out of action one night by a daring raid on the harbour by Italian explosive motor boats, remained to mark this phase of the war.

At the head of the bay lies the village of Suda, to one side of which, half-way up the hill, is a two-storeyed yellow-plastered brick building. Here, in the principal ground-floor room, three men were in conference.

At a plain deal table sat a small, round-shouldered individual, dressed in the national costume of the island—black leather top boots, baggy black breeches, and bespangled green waistcoat offset by a red sash, through which was thrust a long, sheathed dagger. His unkempt black hair, heavy close-knit eyebrows and bloodshot eyes, were in keeping with his swarthy complexion. He sat with his back to the single window, through which the rays of the evening sun revealed in every detail the dark features of the two men who stood facing him across the table. They, too, wore the national costume, with the addition of a leather bandolier of ammunition slung across one shoulder. Their features had one thing in common—each was a mask for a nature which was as cunning as it was cruel, as ruthless as it was hard.

As to whether all, or even any, were Greeks, there was considerable doubt. They conversed, curiously, in

English, but their accents suggested that this was only a question of using the one language which all understood. He who sat at the table, singularly unimpressive in appearance yet dominating the others by the dynamic force behind his words, was addressed by them as "General." He addressed the others, in tones which indicated clearly that they were his servile subordinates, as Joseph and Amigo, which suggested Semitic and Iberian nationality respectively rather than Greek.

The "General" looked up from the sheet of paper which he held between the nicotine-stained fingers of his right hand and looked at his two "lieutenants."

"So," he said, a suggestion of a sardonic smile twisting his unpleasant features, "the Government send us an ultimatum. Unless the E.P.I.R.E.S. surrender their arms by noon on Friday—that is, in three days' time—they will use force against us."

He who was called Amigo drawled: "That's the size of it, General."

"They have threatened us before," said the General.

"Yes," remarked Joseph, "but not in such definite terms."

"True, my friend," answered the General, "but I am still not impressed. To do anything, they must land an army on this island. But can you, Amigo, or you, Joseph, *imagine them doing so*? Why, already I can picture their transports being torpedoed by our submarines or bombed by our aircraft as they attempt the passage to the island. As for those who might manage to land, surely you do not doubt that our men could destroy them?"

"No doubt about that, General," drawled Amigo. "But it wasn't the Government troops which were worrying us. It's the other part of that ultimatum."

"Yes," enjoined Joseph, "it says they will ask the British Government to help them. An' British troops, ships, an' aircraft is a different matter."

The sardonic smile on the General's face broadened. "So," he said, "it is that which is worrying you. I

had guessed as much. I will therefore, my friends, put your minds at rest. Listen!"

The General paused to light a fat Turkish cigarette, to push it between his thick lips at one corner of his mouth.

"Six months ago," he continued, "when we came together to this island, the E.P.I.R.E.S. were only a disorganised rabble, a collection of small bands of brigands, loosely held together by common political beliefs. We—you Amigo, you Joseph—and I—have changed all that. They are a force to be reckoned with to-day. The Government holds us in awe. They issue ultimatums to us. We are in a position to demand concessions from them if such be our fancy—as indeed it will be. You and I, my friends, are surely under no delusions as to our own interests in this satisfactory affair."

"For sure, General," drawled Amigo. "And we've already agreed on shares. A real fifty-fifty business arrangement."

There was the suggestion of a sneer in Joseph's voice as he interjected: "Yes. Fifty per cent to the General and fifty per cent to be shared between *us*. A real business arrangement!"

"Very well," continued the General, giving no sign that he objected to his lieutenant's comment, "I have already taken steps to ensure that British forces do *not* attack us."

"We would like to believe it, General," commented Amigo, "but we remember a time back in the States when——"

A frown crossed the swarthy face of the figure in the chair. "That will do, Amigo," he snarled. "You know that that was due to unexpected interference by the F.B.I."

Joseph leaned across the table and sneered: "By a dick who wouldn't be squared, you mean, General. That was something you hadn't allowed for. Well, maybe there'll be something this time you haven't allowed for, too."

The smile returned to the General's face. "Nothing

this time, my friends, nothing. In a few days the British forces in the Middle East will be so occupied elsewhere that the Greek Government will call in vain for assistance."

"How do you know that?" asked Joseph, a look of doubt in his face.

"I know," answered the General, "because I have arranged it. Listen. . . ."

Half an hour later the General's two lieutenants left the room together. And from the smirks upon their faces it might be surmised that they were well satisfied with the result of their interview. Together they left the house in animated but subdued conversation, and set out through the twilight down the road which led to the town of Suda.

The General, left for the moment alone, dropped the stub of his cigarette on the floor and ground it beneath the heel of his boot. Then he rose clumsily from his chair, and walked over to a small safe fixed to the wall, unlocked and opened it. From on top of a pile of documents he removed a small book with a red cloth cover.

Returning to his chair, he sat down at the table and drew a sheet of paper towards him. On it he scribbled half a dozen lines of spidery scrawl. Next, after frequently consulting the little red book, he wrote beneath the sentences a series of numerals. And when this was done he transferred the numerals to another sheet of paper, carried out some brief and rapid calculations, from which in the end he evolved three groups—one of three figures, one of four, and one of five. Finally he wrote these three groups on a third sheet of otherwise blank paper. After which he placed the first two sheets in the safe, with the little red book on top of them, closed and locked it.

Only when all this was finished did he allow himself to relax. He sat slumped in his chair, his arms folded, his eyes closed. And after a while the theme of the thoughts which ran through his brain was: "To-day Greece trembles at the name of Roderigo Carvellis. To-morrow, maybe, *the world*." In justification for

which it might be added that whilst some men are born to power, and others have it thrust upon them, there are always those who seek it as assiduously and with such a persistent intensity as a dipsomaniac seeks whisky or the drug addict seeks dope.

After perhaps ten minutes had elapsed the door was opened sharply and a seedy individual dressed in a well-worn suit of grey tweed entered. On his head was a soiled blue peaked cap. Slung diagonally across one shoulder was a leather bandolier. A tommy-gun was slung across the other. He was identifiable as a member of the E.P.I.R.E.S. forces from the green armlet upon his left sleeve, which bore embroidered thereon the appropriate Greek symbols.

He said, in his own language, which was that of Greece: "It is eight o'clock, General. The car is waiting."

The little figure in the chair opened his eyes and sat up sharply. "Give this," he said, holding out the sheet of paper on which he had written the three groups of figures, "to Constantine. Tell him it is for Sigma. Then I am ready."

Five minutes later the General was being driven rapidly towards his residence, a large house some distance up the mountainside and well away from the town.

The road was well worn, and wound its ascending way between high banks topped with unkempt hedges. But this did not stop the driver—the seedy individual who had announced the arrival of the car—from taking advantage of the power of the well-sprung Mercedes saloon. He knew the road blindfold, and his master having once proved that the journey could be accomplished in fifteen minutes, expected it to be achieved in the same time each evening.

To-night, however, the car seemed hardly to have gathered speed before a red light, waving slowly from side to side, appeared in the darkness ahead. With a muttered oath the driver jammed on his brakes, almost throwing the General from the rear seat on to the floor. With a

grinding screech of protest the car skidded to rest. As it did so, two men, each shining a torch inside, thereby blinding the occupants, jumped on to the running-boards, and both in uncompromising tones ordered: "Hands up!"

Revolvers, pointed all too accurately and too close for mental comfort, emphasised the need for immediate compliance. The two men in the car, who had not yet recovered from the surprise of the hold-up, mutely raised their hands.

The individual who had boarded the car on the off side spoke in English: "Watch your man like a knife, Peter." There was a splutter of wrath from "General" Roderigo Carvellis. But he who had been called Peter stifled a torrent of angry protests with a vicious prod of his revolver in the pit of the little man's stomach.

"Go ahead, Gerald," said Peter, "I can look after this specimen."

Gerald spoke curtly to the driver: "If you want to save your skin do what you're told. First, get out—quick!"

To ensure compliance, he gave the stupefied Greek a painful jab in the ribs with his revolver as he opened the door of the car.

It is doubtful whether the Greek could have expected such an order, but spontaneous reaction to the hold-up would account for the surprising rapidity of his next actions. Before the door of the car was fully opened he had hurled himself out. And Major Gerald Chester, taken unawares, was thrown backward off his balance, so that with a crash he fell sprawling, and for the moment helpless, on his back on the ground.

In the process his finger clutched the trigger of his revolver, sending a single round harmlessly into the air with a sharp report which shattered the silence of the night. Meantime the Greek, having accomplished his first design, set off down the road at a run which rapidly became a sprint.

Commander Peter Browning, preoccupied with his task

of guarding the more important occupant of the car, and lacking both training and experience in the art of individual combat such as is the function of devotees like Chester of the "cloak-and-dagger" game, might have been excused had he taken no effective action to deal with the escaping captive. But his naval training, which teaches both officers and men to react immediately to the unexpected and to rise above the worst emergency, stood him in good stead.

Chester had originally intended to dispose of the driver of the car by the very silent but indubitably effective Commando method of a fine wire noose twisted taut round the neck, but the need for silence no longer remained. One pistol shot had already disturbed the night, another would do no more harm.

With a rapidity which he afterwards admitted surprised no one more than himself, Browning spun round, and, taking quick aim at the retreating figure before it was finally lost in the darkness, fired—twice. With the second shot the fleeing driver stumbled, staggered on a few more steps, lurched sideways, and, with part curse, part groan, fell forward to the ground. The Greek's attempt to escape, whether it was to give the alarm and obtain help, or whether it was merely to save his skin, had ended as suddenly as it had begun.

Chester, already recovered from the attack which had so suddenly been made upon him, was quick to appreciate Browning's action.

"Well done, Peter!" he exclaimed. "Well done, man!" Scrambling to his feet, he continued: "Watch out that your prisoner doesn't try the same trick while I have a look at the driver."

Chester set off along the road in the direction in which the driver had fled. Despite the darkness, he had little difficulty in locating the huddled body of the Greek. A cursory examination convinced him of the good fortune which had attended Browning's aim. The man was dead. Swiftly he removed his jacket, leather bandolier, and E.P.I.R.E.S. arm-band. He recovered the peaked blue

cap which had fallen from the man's head and rolled into the ditch. Carrying all these he returned to the car.

"He's quite dead," he said. "You never fired a better shot than you've done to-night, Peter. But we must get a move on. God alone knows who heard those shots, or how soon the alarm will be raised and the whole pack on our tracks."

While speaking, Chester had pulled off the blouse of his battledress and stuffed it beneath the front seat of the car. Then he donned the cap, jacket, bandolier, and arm-band which had belonged to the deceased Greek driver.

"What's the idea?" asked Peter Browning.

"Bluff, Peter, bluff," was the answer. "Those shots have probably given the alarm. But in any case we're almost certain to fall foul of at least one E.P.I.R.E.S. patrol. If that happens I'll deal with 'em; and come what may, you sit tight in the back and make sure that our prisoner doesn't utter a word—not a sound. I'll try and ensure that no one sees him or you. In this kit in the dark I'll just pass inspection with any luck. But if the worst comes to the worst, there's only one answer for you, Peter—bluff, man, bluff."

"O-kay," answered Browning with a confidence he was far from feeling. Already he was seated in the rear of the car, alongside the huddled figure of the General, who was silent now and breathing heavily; the effect, doubtless, of an automatic pressing hard into his body just below his left ribs.

Climbing into the driver's seat, Chester had located the self-starter, put the car into gear, released the brake, and let out the clutch. Once more the car was on its way. Speed was essential, yet speed at any of the inevitably unexpected bends in the road might mean an accident to the car which, even if the occupants were unhurt, would render their scheme abortive. With this in mind, Chester forced the car up the winding road as fast as he dared, wrenching the wheel first to right then to left as the headlights suddenly showed each sharp turn in the road.

For five, ten, fifteen minutes he drove thus. Then he turned off the car's lights and gently brought it to rest.

"Listen, Peter, for a moment. I want to see if there's any sign of our being followed."

The dead silence which ensued was sufficient to show that this was probably not the case; but it was suddenly broken by a flow of filthy invective from their prisoner. Browning turned in his seat and struck the man across the face.

"You dirty swine," he exclaimed, "we'll soon stop that sort of thing! I'm going to gag him, Gerald. It's the only way to make sure he doesn't shout if we have to stop for a patrol. I'll turn his collar up and put a scarf round the lower part of his face and hope that nobody sees anything wrong if they look inside the car."

With Browning, action always swiftly followed speech. The General was soon gagged and the result concealed from casual gaze.

When once more the car drove on, it became apparent that they were approaching wilder and more open country. The hedges which topped the banks had straggled away to nothing; the banks themselves had dropped until there was nothing beyond the grass verge to mark the side of the road. Beyond, open ground stretched away into the night.

Suddenly a white light from a waving lamp flashed out ahead.

Chester said: "An E.P.I.R.E.S. patrol, Peter. Now for it," and slowed the car to a crawl.

The black shape of a small building beside the road loomed up out of the darkness. A yellow streak of light in its side indicated an open door and life within. Chester drove deliberately at the figure holding the lamp in the middle of the road, causing him to jump aside with a sudden shout. In the brief moment during which he was illuminated in the car's head-lamps there was no mistaking his green and red E.P.I.R.E.S. arm-band, or, for that matter, the rifle slung over his shoulder. Twenty yards beyond him Chester brought the car to rest. He jumped

out at once, and with rapid strides walked back to the guard-house, from which, startled by the sentry's call, more of the rebels were emerging.

Before they could speak, Chester barked in Greek in a commanding voice that brooked no argument. "Where is the sergeant in charge?"

One figure stood out a little from the guard and replied: "Here, sir."

"Do you realise whose car you have stopped?"

The sergeant had only just been awakened from sleep. He was not himself. He was overawed by the voice, which he had no doubt was that of an officer, which so pertinently challenged him. He had visions of some dire punishment in store for him. There had been a time when membership of the E.P.I.R.E.S. had been a free and easy business. But ever since he whom they called the General had become their leader it had been different. Breaches of discipline, or worse still, negligence of duty, were no longer tolerated. Why, only last week he had seen a man flogged for no more than being temporarily absent from his place of duty. He shuddered at the unpleasant recollection and decided to keep silent.

Chester, speaking rapidly and in a rising tone of anger, continued: "Of course you do. Every man in the island knows the General's car. And every guard on the road knows his orders: that they are to turn out and salute when he passes, whether by day or by night. Above all, though guards are to stop every other car, *never, never* are they to stop the General's. He only slows down as he passes. That is sufficient for anybody but a god-damned fool like you to recognise him."

Chester moved closer to the patrol until he seemed to tower over the sergeant. There was an obvious threat in his voice as he went on: "And why are you standing about doing nothing? Fall in your patrol at once, you incompetent idiot, and get a move on!"

Chester snapped the last words in a tone which caused the gathering of some dozen E.P.I.R.E.S. men to comply without awaiting the nervous order from their sergeant.

"Now," said Chester, "what's your name?"

"Bernachi, sir—Sergeant Bernachi."

"You will hear more of this, Sergeant Bernachi."

With this parting shot, Chester turned on his heel and strode rapidly back to the car. As he swung the door open and jumped into the driving seat, he spoke over his shoulder to Browning: "I've bluffed 'em for a moment, Peter. We've got our prisoner through that patrol without any one looking inside the car. But we're by no means out of the wood yet."

"Don't be so damnably pessimistic," cried Browning as once again Chester let in the car's clutch. "After this little effort I believe you'd have enough nerve to bluff us past the devil himself."

But, as fortune would have it, they were not called upon to try bluff again. Given an iron nerve and physical endurance, attributes which neither of the two Englishmen lacked, one can do a lot in a wild, desolate country such as Crete, even if it be under the domination of a rebel force such as the E.P.I.R.E.S. For when a country suffers for a while by coming under the domination of men who know no law save that of force, there will always remain those, even if they be few, to whom freedom and the rule of law is a way of life not to be lightly set aside. Thus in Crete there were among the inhabitants not a few who believed in the true government of their country and looked to the day when the E.P.I.R.E.S. would no longer terrorise their island. These were true patriots, of a loyalty, bravery, and valour unsurpassed. It was among such as these that Browning and Chester found friends long before dawn. And when daylight came they and their prisoner were hidden beyond the gaze of the E.P.I.R.E.S. patrols, who were spreading everywhere over the island in search of their leader.

The building in which the two Englishmen with their captive were hidden was a little whitewashed farmhouse half-way up the side of a gorse-covered hill. The E.P.I.R.E.S. troops gave it but a cursory glance. They

knew too well the grey-bearded figure of Tino Alexis who lived there. They had seen him so often pottering about around his farm chuckling and singing to himself. If you tried to talk to him you were greeted with an inane grin but never a sensible remark. Oh, yes, old Tino was an idiot, no doubt about that, a grinning idiot, and quite incapable of doing any harm.

So the rebels thought, and fortunately they applied this observation to the possibility of Tino harbouring those for whom they sought.

They did not know that Tino was a Greek patriot—of a loyalty, bravery, and valour unsurpassed.

IV

AT ANY British naval headquarters the Admiral in command may be expected to preside every forenoon at a regular hour over a formal meeting of his principal staff officers. In addition, since Coastal Command, or, abroad, its equivalent, is under the operational control of the Navy, the Air Officer Commanding the local R.A.F. group and his principal staff officers may also attend. Operations carried out during the past twenty-four hours are noted, current problems are discussed, and immediate decisions made thereon.

Such a conference was in progress at the combined Naval and R.A.F. Headquarters at Alexandria at ten o'clock on a Tuesday morning, five days after the night on which Browning and Chester had successfully waylaid the leader of the E.P.I.R.E.S. in Crete. Light reflected off the big maps which filled the four walls of the room fell upon nearly a score of officers in their tropical working dress of shirt and shorts seated around the perimeter of a horseshoe-shaped table covered with green baize cloth.

At the head of the table sat Vice-Admiral Reginald Arthur Pulgrave, a big, sturdy figure with highly-coloured features, large nose, and firm jaw. In striking contrast,

the Captain who sat on his left, his Chief of Staff, was exceptionally tall, pale of face, and seemingly of a physique too frail to stand the rigours of life at sea. A somewhat bibulous episode at a wardroom guest-night many years ago had earned him the nickname "Pants."

The remaining naval officers present were a mixed bag of commanders and lieutenant commanders. They ranged from, for example, Commander Hezeltine, the press liaison officer, forty-five, and "passed over," so far as promotion to higher rank was concerned, through Commander Walton, the Staff Officer Operations, to Lieutenant Commander John Prentice, the Signal Officer, fresh, young, and not yet even in the zone for a brass hat. One stood out from the others by virtue of his khaki uniform: the Staff Officer Intelligence was Major Penn of the Royal Marines.

On the Admiral's left sat the A.O.C., Air Vice-Marshal Quennel, a well-built, jovial-looking man, who had started life in the Navy, transferred to the Royal Naval Air Service as far back as 1914, and in 1918 became one of the foundation members of the R.A.F. Next to Quennel sat his Senior Air Staff Officer, a youthful-looking Air Commodore, whose decorations bid fair towards offsetting his lack of years. "Group Captain Ops," and the squadron leader whose duties gave him the title Air Intelligence Officer, completed the Air Staff.

Finally, the Army was represented by a young captain in the Queen's from the staff of Force 292, who sat by the side of a senior major who had been seconded from the Highland Light Infantry for duty as the Navy's military liaison officer.

Vice-Admiral Reginald Pulgrave had entered the conference-room, closely followed by his Chief of Staff, punctually at ten. He had, as was his invariable custom, greeted the assembled officers, who had risen to their feet, with a cheerful "good-morning." One minute later an embarrassed Major Penn had furtively entered the room with muttered apologies and an armful of

documents. No one took any notice, since the late arrival of the S.O.I. was a regular morning occurrence.

The disturbance having subsided, the Admiral remarked: "All present, Kelly?"

The Chief of Staff glanced round, then replied: "Yes, sir, everyone except Browning."

"Oh, yes," answered Admiral Pulgrave. "When's he expected back?"

The Staff Officer Operations looked up from the pile of signal forms lying on the table before him to comment: "M.L. 683, with Browning on board, should be entering the harbour now, sir. She was reported off the port half an hour ago."

"Good," commented the Admiral. "I shall want to see him some time this morning, Kelly. Bring him along about twelve. Now, Hezeltine, go ahead."

The naval Press Liaison Officer placed horn-rimmed spectacles upon his nose, and, from a small notebook, proceeded to give a brief digest of such titbits from the latest news as he considered were of "official" interest. He was followed by the Staff Navigating Officer, who, under the guise of a weather survey, rendered a dissertation on the subject of warm fronts, cold fronts, cyclones, anti-cyclones, ridges of high pressure, and ridges of low and all the other mumbo-jumbo whereby the meteorologists earn their living.

Walton, the S.O.O., came next. Taking a long wooden pointer in hand, he walked over to one of the wall maps on which the latest positions of all the ships at sea were marked in black chalk. Pointing to each ship as he named it, Walton said: "*Verity* is on her way to Beirut. She's due there to-morrow to relieve the *Volage* as guardship, sir."

"The situation in Syria," interrupted the Admiral, "seems much easier. I'm hoping we shall be able to withdraw the *Verity* without relief at the end of the week."

Walton continued: "The *Pansy* and *Rose* are on patrol off the Palestine coast. The *Ternble* leaves Port

Said this evening for Malta and onward routing to the U.K."

The Admiral appeared suddenly to see something which amused him. With a throaty chuckle he asked: "What is that queer vessel doing off Alexandria, Walton?"

A puzzled expression crossed the S.O.O.'s face. He looked hard at the map. There was only one ship marked off the port—the submarine *Ultimatum*. Nothing odd about that. Then his face cleared and he smiled. In the spelling of the name the 'a' had been omitted.

"I'm afraid," he said, "the duty Wren needs a spelling lesson, sir."

"You tell the young woman," answered the Admiral with a laugh, "that she'd better go down and apologise to the Captain of H.M.S. *Ultimtum*. He ought to appreciate the abbreviation. I do!"

Admiral Pulgrave, having had his morning joke to his own great satisfaction—and the rest of the staff had not been unamused—Commander Walton continued: "The *Colossus*, sir, is off Algiers. She's due here the day after to-morrow."

The Admiral turned to the A.O.C. "She's our latest battleship, Quennel." He turned to the Chief of Staff: "You've arranged for her to stay in harbour until Saturday night, haven't you, Kelly?"

"Yes, sir."

"Good! I want them to have time for each watch to have a couple of runs ashore. He turned again to the A.O.C.: "And I want to have a bit of a party aboard on Friday. I've asked Attwater and Risk down from Cairo to see the ship. I expect you'd like to come, eh, Quennel?"

"Most certainly," was the bluff answer.

Walton, after waiting patiently for the termination of this digression, again continued his dissertation: "The destroyers *Wishart* and *Westminster* are on their way back from their cruise, sir. They had a bit of an argument with a Cretan torpedo boat at dawn this morning. They

caught her stopping the *Empire Star* off Antikythera Island."

"The E.P.I.R.E.S. will soon have to be taught a lesson," commented the Admiral. "Interference with British shipping on the high seas is plain bloody impertinence."

His comments on the subject of the rebel and certainly troublesome Greek revolutionaries ensconced in the island of Crete were cut short by the sudden entrance of his secretary. The Admiral looked towards him sharply: "What is it, Sec.?"

"There's a call just come through from Cairo, sir. Commander Denny wants to speak to you on an urgent matter."

"Right!" came the immediate answer. "Prentice!" The Admiral looked across the table towards his Signal Officer. "Go up and see what he wants. Tell him I'm at this meeting, and, if necessary, will ring him back in about twenty minutes."

From listening to the dry recitals of his brother staff officers and the Admiral's occasional comments thereon, Prentice welcomed any justifiable—to both his seniors and his own conscience—opportunities to escape, even if, as in this case, it was no more than speaking on the telephone to Denny, the Staff Officer Plans, in Cairo. It at least gave him time to smoke half a cigarette. But if he thus seemed to treat life with a spirit of irresponsible levity, no one could accuse him of failing to realise when something serious had occurred or of dilatoriness in taking such action thereon as was his duty. Wherefore the bantering sentences with which he opened his conversation with Commander Denny died on his lips as soon as he gathered but one quarter of the purport of that officer's staccato phrases.

He finished with the words: "All right, sir. I'll tell Master all that right away. Yes, at once. And I expect he'll ring you back."

By the time he re-entered the conference-room the S.O.O. had completed his part in the morning's proceed-

ings, and the Group Captain "Ops" had dealt briefly with the part R.A.F. planes had played in co-operating with their sister Service in the job of policing the Eastern Mediterranean.

Admiral Pulgrave at once noticed the grave expression on his Signal Officer's face. He asked jestingly: "Hallo! What's up, Prentice? You look as if you'd seen a ghost."

"One copy of the draft of the new treaty has disappeared, sir."

In the span of time which followed Prentice's laconic report one could have heard the proverbial pin drop, so profound was the shock which the news had upon all the officers present.

The Admiral said: "This is very serious news, Prentice. Have you any details?"

"Yes, sir. It's the copy which you sent back to Cairo yesterday with your remarks. It was put in the usual correspondence bag which is taken up by courier every night. He went by car by the Desert Road. A passing Army truck found it stationary by the side of the road, with both occupants dead inside. They had been shot. The correspondence bag was missing."

Dead silence greeted Prentice's statement until the Admiral asked: "Whereabouts was this?"

"Five miles this side of the half-way house, sir."

"By the oasis of Wadi Natrun?"

"That's it, sir."

"Any idea what happened?"

"The military police are investigating it, sir, but they've not made a detailed report yet."

The Admiral turned to his Chief of Staff. "*Damn, Kelly,*" he said, "and again *damn*. This is just about the worst thing that could have happened. Until the terms are finally settled, the draft of that treaty's just about the most inflammable material there is. If it's fallen into the wrong hands, it's good-bye to peace in the Middle East."

"I was wondering, sir," was the slow answer, "how

any one could have known that we were going to send the draft treaty by last night's courier. Surely the hold-up may only have been a chance affair by marauding Bedouins after money."

"That possibility doesn't alter the fact that the correspondence bag has gone and with it the treaty, Pants."

"I realise that, sir. But it *does* mean that it may not yet have fallen into the hands of any one who could do real harm with it."

"You mean that if we're quick—and lucky—we've a chance of recovering it before any damage is done."

"I do, sir, though it sounds rather a pious hope. I've no idea where one would even start to look for it."

The Admiral turned suddenly to glare across the room at his Staff Officer Intelligence.

"That," he said firmly, "is your job, Penn. You realise, of course, the importance of this: the imperative need for recovering the draft treaty before any one can use it as a very potent weapon against us. You know as well as I do that there are not a few people waiting for such a *casus belli*. Some of those gentry were not born within a thousand miles of Egypt; their only interest in it are as a likely spot for trouble whence they can extract unlimited personal profit.

Major Penn was already on his feet, his papers in hand.

"I quite realise all that," he said soberly. "If you'll excuse me, sir, I'll get in touch with the Security people right away."

"Yes, do, Penn," answered the Admiral; "and keep me fully informed of what is being done."

"Aye, aye, sir."

As the S.O.I. went out, Admiral Pulgrave turned to the A.O.C. "This is so important, Quennel, that I must ring up the G.O.C.-in-C. right away. I hope you won't mind if we terminate this meeting."

"Not at all," answered the Air Vice-Marshal. "I quite understand."

Rising to his feet, Admiral Pulgrave pushed back his chair with a jerk, turned and stalked out of the room.

The Staff meeting thus terminated, John Prentice made his way to his office. The loss of the treaty was not his immediate concern, and it passed out of his mind as soon as he saw Peter Browning sitting on a chair awaiting him.

Prentice greeted him warmly. "My dear Peter, well done, indeed. Waylaying and shanghai-ing an E.P.I.R.E.S. general is splendid work."

"Thanks, John, though it was nothing, really," commented Browning, slightly embarrassed by his friend's enthusiasm. "My part in the business was quite incidental. The credit's all due to Gerald Chester."

"Nonsense, Peter; I'm sure you did as much as any one to bring it off. We're all waiting to hear how you did it."

"I suppose I must go and report that to the Admiral."

"Not yet, Peter. He told Pants at the staff meeting that he'd see you at twelve. There's time to give me the low-down first."

"O.K., Peter. Here goes—but it'll have to be brief."

Towards the end of his story Browning described how he and Chester had made their way across the island back to Plaka Bay with the ready aid of Greek patriots who were prepared to risk their lives in any way which would hasten the day when their country would be freed from the lawless domination of the E.P.I.R.E.S. From there an M.L. had brought them with their prisoner back to Alexandria.

"What have you done with this bird?" asked Prentice when Browning had finished.

"Chester's taking him straight up to Cairo under escort."

"You say he was the leader of the E.P.I.R.E.S.?"

"So I gathered," answered Browning, "though he looked a pretty seedy sort of bird. I never heard his name."

"I imagine it's the chap who goes by the name of Roderigo Carvellis," commented Prentice. "I gather he's the man behind the E.P.I.R.E.S. revolt. But S.O.I. will be able to tell you more about him."

"Oh," retorted Browning, "I'm not particularly interested in him—not now, anyway. He's well out of harm's way as far as his gang of brother cut-throats are concerned, and I gather that without him the whole rebellion will collapse."

"For which mercy we shall certainly give thanks, Peter," replied Prentice. "It will bring us one stage nearer to restoring real peace and order in this part of the world. The Navy will at last be able to return to its good old peace-time routine of visits to Malta, alternating with pleasant cruises to such delectable spots as the South of France and the Adriatic. Don't you dream sometimes, Peter, of those winter seasons at Malta with the 'fishing fleet' in full cry?"

"I do not," retorted Browning with a laugh, "except in nightmares. Remember, John, we're not all beastly poodle-fakers like you. But I'll grant you I should like to do one of those old autumn cruises to the uninhabited parts of the Jugo-Slavian coast again or even the Aegean islands——"

"Just for the shooting," interjected Prentice in a tone of mock ridicule. "I prefer blondes. Which reminds me," he added, changing his tone, "Tania's staying with us."

"Tania?" Browning was for the moment puzzled. "Oh, yes, your actress friend, Miss Maitland. Condescendingly he added: "She's not at all bad for a woman."

Further conversation between the two friends was cut short by the arrival of a Marine orderly with a message to the effect that the Admiral wanted to see Commander Browning in his office right away. Wherefore Prentice contented himself with saying: "See you later, Peter—at supper to-night."

"Why not at lunch?" asked Browning, pausing in the doorway.

"Because, if I know Master, he'll ask you to lunch. He's a hospitable old boy, and he'll like to have your

yarn at his leisure over a glass of gin wine. He's got some Plymouth, by the way."

"Which," laughed Browning as he finally left his friend's office, "is a substance I never refuse."

In theory Egypt is governed by a democratic parliament, but the result is not democracy as we understand it. The Crown may not be all-powerful, but it can exercise an overriding control, and does so frequently in no uncertain manner. Thus, should the Prime Minister and his party incur the enmity of the Crown, the expression "His Majesty's Opposition," which in England is a mere figure of parliamentary speech, becomes in Egypt an actual fact. The Opposition is then in a strong position to make things extremely awkward for the Government. And one of the most popular methods adopted with monotonous regularity is the deliberate creation of civil disorder. And the many students are only too ready to start it.

They begin a small disturbance, which rapidly draws a crowd that can swell in no time to an alarming extent. And in that crowd will be some whose records are far from unblemished. As a result, physical violence succeeds vocal protest. The temper of the crowd rises and almost always transfers its attentions from the Government to foreigners.

Shortly after noon on the day on which Peter Browning arrived back from Crete the terraces in front of the Continental Hotel in Cairo began to fill with the usual polyglot collection of individuals intent on taking their luncheon aperitif. Their attention was first distracted by an indistinguishable discordant chorus, becoming audible above the roar of traffic. The source of this vocal display soon became visible in the appearance of a ragged and disordered procession of some two hundred youths which disgorged from an adjacent street into the big open square in front of the Opera House. A small portion of this crowd was dressed European fashion, save for the inevitable crimson *tarbouche*. The remainder likewise

wore this form of headgear, but below were clothed in the normal Egyptian garment, the *galabieh*, which is in colour usually a dirty white, and approximates closely to the nightgown of our grandparents' generation. There were, in addition, the usual hangers-on in the form of a motley assortment of extremely dirty children of both sexes. Those who understood Arabic were able to appreciate that the comparatively amiable chant which emanated from the procession consisted largely of derogatory remarks about the Egyptian Prime Minister.

Having arrived in the centre of the square, the cavalcade gathered in a loosely-formed circle around one of their number, who, climbing a suitable vantage point, proceeded to exhort them with considerable physical exertion to yet greater vocal efforts. Attracted by the noise, an ever-increasing number of Egyptians began to converge upon the square, swelling every moment the mob in its centre. And at this point its temper began to rise, and hooliganism took the place of high spirits.

A single mounted policeman was brave yet rash enough to attempt to disperse the mob. Somehow or other he was pulled to the ground. Then a car, whose driver became impatient at being held up, endeavoured to force its way through. The driver was dragged from his vehicle, which was abruptly overturned. He was clearly a European. It was not long before the crowd had shifted their attentions from the Prime Minister to foreigners in general and the British in particular.

All this had, of course, taken time. Word had been passed to those in authority, and police reinforcements were on their way to deal with the position. But before they could arrive, a British military staff car came on the scene. The driver had been sent to the Main Station, with instructions to pick up a single individual, who was arriving from Alexandria under escort, and convey him to Khasr-el-Nil Barracks. He had completed the first part of his mission successfully, and, bearing "General" Roderigo Carvellis, together with his escort of a subaltern and two armed members of the British Corps of Military

Police, was proceeding back to the barracks, as ordered. But on reaching Opera House Square he found his way barred by an angry mob.

The appearance of the British military vehicle was the signal for a frenzied roar from the nearest portion of the crowd, followed by a concerted rush upon it. Flowing all round the car they made further movement impossible. The subaltern and his men were momentarily at a loss, and a moment later they and their prisoner were somewhat violently dragged from the car. The close proximity of the struggling mob made the defensive use of firearms quite impracticable, even if it had been wise.

The car was inevitably overturned, and the five occupants were insulted and handled roughly by the crowd. They were, too, soon separated. Their caps were knocked off and trampled in the road, their jackets torn off their backs. The fact that one who wore black top boots, black baggy trousers and green waistcoat, was clearly not British like the others made no difference to his treatment by the Egyptian crowd.

At this point the police reinforcements arrived. Large squads of mounted men entered the square from four streets at once. They began to use their batons in no uncertain manner. The crowd began to retreat, slowly at first, then faster. Finally they broke into a run. In a quarter of an hour the great square had been cleared.

In one corner, by the side of the Opera House, a bruised and dishevelled British officer, together with his three men in a similar state, were considering somewhat sheepishly their lack of uniform and the possibility of obtaining early first aid for the nasty cuts which two had sustained. They were also considering the more serious fact that they had lost their prisoner. With the dispersal of the crowd he had entirely vanished—not a difficult feat for one who, minus half his clothes, resembled an Egyptian *fellah* far more closely than he did an Englishman.

When residents and guests at the Continental Hotel returned from their lunch in the restaurant to the terrace for their coffee, Opera House Square had resumed its

normal appearance of a scurrying medley of trams, motor vehicles, and pedestrians. And the peace of the afternoon was, as is usual, disturbed by nothing more than the awful screech of the trams as they rounded the bend into the square.

When the news of Carvellis's escape reached Browning the same evening, he felt a natural irritation at this negation of the results of his recent adventures. But he only voiced his feelings to the extent of commenting to Prentice: "It seems, John, that we spoke a little too soon when we said this morning that this bird was safely out of harm's way."

"Well, he is, as far as the E.P.I.R.E.S. are concerned, Peter. He hasn't a hope of getting back to Crete. And he can't really do any harm in Egypt. Besides, Penn's security boys will catch him before many days are up."

V

NEXT MORNING Browning was sitting in his office writing the unavoidable official report on his Cretan adventures when the telephone rang. Lifting the receiver he heard John Prentice's voice: "That you, Peter? I'm off to sea for twenty-four hours in the *Lancer*. The ship's doing night exercises, which gives me an opportunity for some W/T¹ trials. I shan't be back until to-morrow morning."

"All right, John, I won't expect you for meals to-day."

"That's not quite the point, Peter. There's Tania. Will you look after her at lunch and see that she has a car down to the theatre in time for the show to-night? And," Prentice continued, "could you possibly pick her up afterwards? Sorry to lurk you for this, but I feel a certain responsibility towards her while she's our guest."

"Of course I'll look after her, John," Browning answered cheerfully. "I was going to be home for lunch anyway. A car to the theatre's easily arranged. Picking her up afterwards shouldn't be difficult. I rather thought of seeing the show again some time, and to-night's as good as any."

"Thanks!" John's voice paused for a moment before, slightly hesitant, he continued: "Peter, do you think you could do something else for me to-night?"

"Depends what it is, old boy."

"It'll probably seem rather silly, and I may be barking up quite the wrong tree. It's the result of a brainstorm in my bath this morning. Do you remember that fellow Roger Stetson in *Black and White*—the one who did an impromptu sketching act?"

"Of course I do. We had a bit of an argument about whether he really used the figures the audience called out. You won a quid off me, thanks to Tania settling for us the fact that they were prearranged."

¹ Wireless Telegraphy.

"When Stetson does his turn to-night I want you to make a note of the numbers he uses and let me have them to-morrow."

"Of course I will, John, though for the life of me I can't see what you want them for."

"I may be able to explain to-morrow. If I'm right it's something pretty big. But I must be going now, Peter; the boat's waiting. Thanks very much for promising to look after Tania."

Shortly after one o'clock Browning returned to No. 16 Spinney Villas, the home he shared with Prentice. It was a small house, about ten minutes' walk from his office along the Corniche in the direction of Sidi Bishr. As Browning crossed the threshold of the large sitting-room, with its cheerful atmosphere of chintz curtains and similarly covered chairs, his eyes lighted on the slender figure of Tania Maitland. She was charmingly dressed in a white silk blouse and a skirt of emerald green. The beauty of her golden hair was enhanced by the deep crimson rose entwined into it.

Hearing Browning enter, she lowered the newspaper she had been reading and looked up at him with a welcoming smile. Despite his normal lack of interest in the female sex, he would have been less than a man had he been unconscious of her charms. Indeed, his heart beat a shade faster than usual as he looked at the refreshing picture which she made lying on the settee. To him, at least, there was no denying the fact that she had that quality which has been variously described according to the age as "it," "S.A.," or latterly as just "something." But the tone of his voice was strictly matter of fact, perhaps even a shade formal, when he spoke.

"Miss Maitland, how nice to see you again. I do hope I haven't kept you waiting for lunch. I must apologise, too, for not having seen you before since you came to stay with us. But I've been away and only returned yesterday morning. Then I had to lunch with the Admiral, and by the time I arrived home in the evening you'd already left for the theatre. And I fear I was so

weary that I turned in before you came back. Very ungallant, I'm afraid."

There was music in her voice as she answered with a smile: "But, my dear, I'm your guest! There's nothing to forgive. It's terribly sweet of you and John to have me here at all. I'm only sorry I have to keep such late hours."

Browning replied, the tone of his voice still essentially matter of fact: "Well, it's very nice of you to put it that way, Miss Maitland. Shall we lunch?"

"I'm ready any time you like, Commander Browning." She laid deliberate but slight emphasis on the last two words. Peter was taken slightly aback.

"I say," he said, with an air of slight embarrassment, "would you mind calling me Peter? Commander Browning sounds frightfully formal."

"Certainly, Peter," she answered with a gay laugh, "on one condition."

"What is it?"

"That you drop this Miss Maitland nonsense. Tania's my name, and I don't think it's a bad one."

"Tania it is then," smiled Browning, "and a very nice name, too."

Rising, she dropped him a mock curtsy: "Thank you, my lord, for those kind words," she murmured. Then continued: "What's happened to John? Isn't he coming back to lunch?"

"Afraid not. He rang me this morning saying he couldn't manage it. He's got something else on."

"Meaning *cherchez la femme*, I suppose?" she queried.

"Not this time! He's gone to sea for twenty-four hours in one of our aircraft carriers. But what gave you the idea it was a woman? I mean, John——"

"He reminds me of a song I used to sing," she interrupted:

*Men are only grown-up boys,
Pretty ladies are their toys.*

"That, Tania, is surely somewhat cynical, and as far as John's concerned——"

"It fits him like a glove, my dear. I haven't known John since I was a small girl of nine for nothing. He was just going to Dartmouth then as a well-scrubbed little naval cadet, but he'd already developed a roving eye. But don't let's talk about John. Tell me what *you've* been doing since we last met."

As they sat down to lunch he replied: "I've been to sea for a few days."

"Is that all?"

"More or less."

"It doesn't sound very exciting."

"Well, I should hardly say that."

"Then tell me more, my dear."

"I'm afraid I can't, Tania."

"You mean you're not allowed to. How stupid of me. I shouldn't have pressed you."

"I'm afraid," he answered with a laugh, "that there are a few official secrets even though there's no war on."

"And how," she smilingly chided him, "you men love having secrets."

Half an hour later, after a lunch as pleasant as any he could remember, Browning said: "Will you forgive me, Tania, if I run away now. I've some work to do. But I'll be back in time to take you down to the theatre."

"Oh, you needn't bother to do that, Peter dear," she replied gratefully; "I can manage by myself."

"Not at all," answered Browning. "I shall be delighted. Besides, it'll be no trouble. I'm coming to the show."

"But you've seen it already!"

"True, my dear, and that's the reason I want to see it again. That, and the fact that you're in it."

Peter Browning secretly prided himself on his misogynistic outlook towards women. He was normally off-hand, not to say churlish, in their presence. Wherefore he was later to realise with surprise that he had unconsciously, yet with pleasurable intent, copied her

habit of using an occasional mild term of endearment in his speech. More than that, he had in his last sentence deliberately paid her an entirely genuine and sincere compliment.

But if she noticed either of these things she gave no sign as she answered lightly: "It's sweet of you to say so."

"All right, then. I'll be back about eight. *Au revoir*, and don't forget the house is yours. There are plenty of books. I hope you won't be bored."

She came to the door of the house with him. "Don't worry about me, Peter," she said as he climbed into the waiting car. "I shall be quite happy by myself. See you to-night."

Black and White was being staged at Alexandria in the Alhambra Theatre. There, from his seat in the stalls, Browning watched for the second time, and with growing admiration, Tania Maitland's delightful artistry. Her versatile talents enabled her to give as much point to a witty character sketch of the vicar's wife opening the village flower-show as her beauty and charm decorated a romantic, musical scena, entitled "Portsmouth Hard." This item immediately preceded Roger Stetson's act. So far as Browning could see, this was no different from what he had seen some ten days before. Possibly the uninspired patter with which he first introduced his act and then drew from the audience the necessary figures for his drawings may have varied a little, though Browning doubted it. Roger Stetson did not strike him as being one of those artists whose ready wit and gift for repartee with the audience were such as to allow a departure from the script. Indeed, if he had any theatrical gifts, apart from an ability to produce lightning, if somewhat spurious, sketches in full view of an audience, Browning came to the conclusion that they did not extend beyond adding a suggestion of something evil to his satanic appearance. Though, thought Browning, even that surely shouldn't be so very difficult given the moustache, black pointed beard, and crimson costume

which the tradition of centuries has made appropriate to such a part.

It did not occur to him that his highly critical attitude towards Stetson's act was due to an as yet only subconscious antipathy towards the man as a result of his ill-mannered behaviour towards Tania at the party in Cairo at which they had all met a week before. This, despite the subsequent alarming encounter with a car dangerously driven by someone who, if not Stetson, looked uncommonly like him.

As for the man's drawings, Browning couldn't be sure whether they were the same as last time, but he had the impression that they were as nearly so as made no difference. He tried to recall the numbers which Stetson had used on that occasion, but a search in the depths of his memory was unsuccessful. However, that didn't really matter. The important thing was to remember the ones used to-night in order to comply with his friend John's request. And so he pencilled them on the margin of his programme.

When the show was over, Browning strolled down to the Corniche, and, leaning over the sea-wall, passed a quarter of an hour smoking a pipe. During this time his thoughts went as far as admitting to himself that he looked forward with both pleasure and elation to the prospect of escorting Tania home. On his way back to the theatre he caught himself whistling the tune of "Home, Dearie, Home," the principal number in the "Portsmouth Hard" scene in the show.

The stage doorkeeper indicated the direction of Tania's room, and Browning, without great difficulty, succeeded in finding the short, narrow passage to one side of the stage off which opened the half-dozen dressing-rooms allocated to the principals. Unlike the rest of the back-stage part of the theatre through which he had passed, which had been peopled by a motley collection of players, musicians, and stage hands, this passage was deserted. Browning glanced at the cards on the doors of the first two rooms. Neither bore the name of Miss Tania

Maitland. He was about to move on to a third, which was perhaps three yards farther along the passage, when he became aware that its door was partially open. And he needed no excuse for eavesdropping when he heard from within Tania's voice speaking in tones low but disturbed.

"Get away, Roger," she said. "You know I don't like this sort of thing. You've tried it before, and I've told you I won't have it."

Peter Browning realised that it was Roger Stetson who answered: "Just one kiss, my dear."

The reply was emphatic.

"No, Roger, and please go out of my dressing-room."

Browning had at first hesitated in the passage, uncertain as to whether he should intrude. Much as he might dislike Roger Stetson, he judged it best to allow Tania to deal with him in her own way. But the next few sentences made him change his mind. For Stetson suddenly leered: "I bet you let those bloody naval officers kiss you. Which one is it you're sweet on—the young cissy or the sexless sea-dog?"

"That's beastly of you, Roger," she retorted, her anger rising, "and I won't have you being rude about my friends. Get out!"

Almost at once Peter heard the sounds of a scuffle coming from within the dressing-room. And Tania, protesting, said: "Take your filthy hands off me, Roger. I detest you!"

At which point Browning decided to intervene. He moved to the door of the dressing-room and pushed it wide open. The fair-haired figure of Roger Stetson was holding the struggling Tania in a lecherous embrace from which she was doing her best to break free. She saw Browning in the doorway, and the distressed expression on her face changed to one of embarrassed appeal. But Stetson, standing with his back to the door, intent on satisfying his own crude desires, was unaware of the intrusion. Which explains the ease with which Browning was able to take action.

In two strides he was across the room, his two hands grasping very firmly Stetson's arms, each in a vice-like grip. Thus surprised, Stetson released his hold on Tania and endeavoured to turn to face his assailant. But before he could even partially achieve this, Browning had lifted him bodily to the door. Then he pushed him through, and, as he went, brought the toe of his right shoe up with all the force he could muster in the seat of Stetson's pants.

As Stetson half-stumbled, half-fell into the passage and against the far wall, he emitted a muffled curse. And before he could rise or recover from his surprise, Browning, standing over him, was saying: "In future you will leave Miss Maitland entirely alone, you miserable cad. If I ever hear that you've laid as much as a finger on her I'll thrash you within an inch of your life."

After which declaration Browning returned to Tania's dressing-room and closed the door.

As she was smoothing down her simple dress of printed silk and tidying her hair, both of which had suffered from Stetson's attack, she gave him a smile of gratitude and said sincerely: "*Thank* you, Peter dear."

"I'm rather afraid," he grinned, "that I am now not very popular with Mister Stetson. But he asked for it. Apart from anything else, I object to being called a sexless sea-dog."

At Peter's last remarks she broke into a peal of laughter, in which, after a moment's embarrassed hesitation, he freely joined. Then he said: "The car's waiting, my dear."

"I'll be ready in half a minute, Peter."

He noted with admiration that she meant what she said. By nature impatient, he had always disliked the time most women took to get themselves ready even for the least important function. Swiftly she glanced at her face in the big table mirror, put the final touches to her make-up, flung a light coat over her shoulders. Then she allowed Browning to escort her to his car, which was standing in the narrow cul-de-sac outside the stage door.

As Browning took his seat in the back beside Tania,

the seaman driver turned. Holding out a small folded piece of paper, he said: "A gentleman gave this to me just now, sir. Said to be sure and give it to you."

"Thanks," answered Browning.

As the car moved off, he opened the note and glanced at its scribbled contents by the light of the car's roof-light. It was brief and to the point:

To Commander Browning:

To kidnap an E.P.I.R.E.S. general in Crete may be very clever. But it is no excuse for your insufferable interference and unwarranted attack upon me to-night. I shall expect an apology to-morrow morning.

Roger Stetson.

"Oh, dear," commented Browning as he read the note to his companion, "I'm afraid Mister Stetson is very, very angry."

Though the rear of the car was now in darkness, he knew that Tania was smiling as she answered: "I suppose he has some justification for that. But really he deserved it. He's been asking for it for some time."

"In that case, my dear, I certainly shall not apologise. How long have you known him, by the way?"

"Only since we arrived in Egypt a month ago."

"Didn't you all come out from England together?"

"Most of us did, but Roger had been out here for some time already. I gather he'd been doing his act in a night club before he joined up with our company."

Browning grunted an acknowledgment to this piece of information and for a while was silent. Presently Tania said: "There's something I want to talk to you about, Peter."

"What's that?" he asked.

"What have you been doing in Crete?"

He hesitated. Then, with as much nonchalance as he could muster, answered: "Crete? Who said I'd been to Crete?"

"Listen, Peter dear, you can't put me off the scent

like that. You've done it already once to-day. I quite understand you can't tell me naval secrets, but I don't see why you shouldn't tell me something which Roger Stetson knows."

He sat up with a jerk. "Roger Stetson knows?" he exclaimed. "Who said so?"

"Don't be stupid, Peter dear. He did, of course, in that silly note of his."

"Good God, so he did!" Browning's surprise was genuine. He had been so preoccupied with the sheer impertinence of Stetson's note that he had overlooked the fact that the man knew not only that he had been to Crete but what he had done there. He voiced his thoughts with the words: "That's extremely odd."

"What is, Peter?" she asked.

"Listen, my dear," he said, "I'll try and explain, only you must promise not to breathe a word to a soul."

His serious tone was sufficient to obtain a like reaction from her: "Of course," she answered, "you can trust me."

"I *have* just been to Crete—with another officer. We went on a special mission to try and capture the leader of the Greek rebels, the E.P.I.R.E.S. We hoped that, if he were out of the way, the rebellion would collapse. Greece has had quite enough trouble in recent years without having a civil war now as a result of this particular gentleman's activities. By good fortune we were successful and we brought him back here yesterday as a prisoner."

"How splendid," she murmured in admiration.

"Very few people know about this, and for various reasons it's necessary it should be kept secret. One reason is the unfortunate fact that, by pure mischance, our prisoner escaped in Cairo yesterday afternoon. We should look most foolish if that got about."

"I see that," she commented.

"Then how did Roger Stetson know about my visit to Crete?" he continued. "It's possible, of course, that

someone who shouldn't have talked, *but*——" He left his sentence unfinished.

Tania said: "Surely that must be the reason, Peter, otherwise he'd never have said anything to you about it."

"True, my dear," answered Browning. "In any case conjecture will get us nowhere. The fact remains that the secret is out, and the source of the leakage will have to be traced. However, that must wait until the morning."

Before she could say any more the car reached Spinney Villas. When they were in the sitting-room Browning declared heartily: "Now, enough of being serious, my dear. You must be famished, and supper is waiting. Come and eat."

"Well, don't make so much noise about it, Peter," she interposed. "My chaperone must be upstairs having her beauty sleep."

"Your chaperone?" he queried in a puzzled tone.

Tania smiled. "Yes, stupid," she answered. "John's Wren cousin—Joan Gill. Why, I *do* believe you'd forgotten all about her."

"Afraid so," admitted Browning with a rueful grin. "That's what comes of being so busy in the office all day."

Tania was not prepared to let him escape with this piece of conceit. "And with a blonde all the evening," she teased.

With appropriate gallantry he replied: "*That* at least is a good excuse."

It was not until next morning that Browning remembered the mission he had executed for his friend John Prentice at the theatre that night. Shortly after ten, whilst he was sitting in his office, the door suddenly opened, and John Prentice blew in like half a gale of wind.

"Morning, Peter," he said with exaggerated cheerfulness, at the same time slapping his friend heartily on the back. "Gosh, it's grand to be at sea again. Had a splendid blow-through last night. Feel on top of the world this morning."

"Shut up and shut the door," retorted Browning, retrieving those of his papers which the draught had blown on to the floor. "Then sit down. Just because you've been to sea for once for a few hours is no excuse for such beastly heartiness. If you drank less and went to bed early as a matter of routine you'd feel like this every morning. Incidentally, I should be interested to discover exactly what proportion of the evening you spent in the wardroom and how much on the bridge. The wardroom would win by several lengths—or perhaps one should say several gins—I'll be bound."

"All right," grinned Prentice, collapsing into a chair like a pricked balloon. "Have it your own way. Mock me if you will, but tell me how things went last night."

"Well," came the answer, "I've got the numbers you wanted." He handed over the copy of the programme of *Black and White*, pointing to where he had pencilled Roger Stetson's numbers in the margin.

From his pocket Prentice extracted a small notebook. In silence he started comparing some figures written therein with those on Browning's programme. Then he muttered to himself: "Nine, five, six. Four, eight, six, two. Five, nine, one, zero, eight." Then aloud he added: "By God, they *are* the same."

"What," inquired Browning, "are the same? What is all this mystery about Stetson's numbers?"

"Listen," answered Prentice, "and I'll explain. Our fixed service with Whitehall has been jammed every forenoon for the last week by a station we couldn't identify. It never uses a call-sign. It just broadcasts for a quarter of an hour three groups of figures—one of three, one of four, and one of five over and over again."

"The same figures each morning?" queried Browning.

"No; different, but the same arrangement into groups of three, four, and five. My first reaction was that I couldn't make anything of such signals, except for an odd feeling that I'd seen something similar before quite recently. Yesterday morning in my bath, as I told you, I had a brainstorm. That fellow Stetson whom we saw

in Cairo in Tania's show used similar groups for his drawings. It seemed very far fetched to imagine that there could be any connection, but there couldn't be any harm in checking that."

"And what conclusion have you arrived at?" asked Browning sceptically.

"I don't know about a conclusion," replied his friend, "but it seems an odd *coincidence* that the groups Stetson used when you saw him last night were identical with those which were transmitted by this interfering transmitter yesterday morning."

Browning was still sceptical. "An odd coincidence, perhaps," he said. "But really, John, it can't be any more than that, unless——" He hesitated.

"Unless what?" asked Prentice.

Browning did not answer. Instead he posed a question: "Tell me, John. Couldn't you identify this mystery station by taking D/F bearings?"

"We can place its position, more or less. In fact we've already done so. It's at the western end of Crete."

"Crete!" exclaimed Browning, sitting up in his chair with a jerk. "That certainly is a coincidence. And two related coincidences usually mean a fact."

Briefly he recounted his meeting with Stetson the evening before in Tania's dressing-room, and in particular the fact that that individual was aware of his exploit in Crete.

"The two things together," finished Browning, "suggest that Roger Stetson is, to say the least, up to no good."

"The sooner we find out exactly what sort of no good the better," commented Prentice.

"Wait," cautioned his friend. "Not too fast. We must think carefully what's to be done. First of all, let's marshal *all* the facts we have to go on."

"Item one," responded Prentice: "Roger Stetson is a theatrical artist of apparently blameless reputation, apart from a predisposition for Tania which leads him to forget his manners."

"Item two," commented Browning, as he jotted down

the first point on a sheet of paper: "He has, on two occasions, lost his temper with me. The first time he subsequently tried to run us down with his car—at least I think he did. The second time he threatened me with a melodramatic note."

"Item three," said Prentice: "He knows something about your recent activities in Crete, which he shouldn't."

"That," said Browning, "is the first *important* point. The next—item four—is that an unidentified W/T station is broadcasting every morning on so many cycles—you can fill in the figure—at—what time?"

"Ten o'clock," said Prentice.

"At ten o'clock each morning," continued Browning, "a message consisting of different figures each time, but always arranged in the same three groups, one of three figures, one of four, and one of five."

"Item five," said Prentice: "The transmitter is fixed in Crete."

"And item six," he continued, now showing some excitement: "Roger Stetson does a turn which uses groups of three, four, and five figures, and last night they were the same as those transmitted by this station in Crete yesterday morning."

"Item seven," commented Browning: "Remember our little wager the first time we saw Master Stetson. The numbers he uses are prearranged. He does *not* use numbers suggested by the audience, though he pretends to do so. We have Tania's word for that."

"Seven items," said Prentice, looking at the list now lying on Browning's desk; "and what do they add up to?"

"I'm damned if I know," laughed Browning. "Even supposing he does listen to this wireless station, why on earth does he display the groups for all the world to see in his drawings in *Black and White*?"

"Don't ask me," retorted Prentice. "I'm fogged. It seems a crazy thing to do. Do you think we should report all this to the S.O.I. and let his security blokes pursue it?"

"By rights I suppose we should. But our evidence seems rather flimsy. He may well pooh-pooh the whole affair."

"Knowing old Penn better than you, Peter, I should say he'd listen sympathetically, say, of course, he'd look into it—and then do damn all!"

Browning nodded. "Yes," he said slowly. "I really think we must try and find out something more about Stetson before we spill the beans."

Prentice was puzzled. "How do you propose to do that?" he asked. "We could check up and see if the numbers he uses to-night are the same as this morning's transmissions, but that doesn't seem to take us anywhere."

"Wait," said Browning; "let me think for a moment." He poked the half-burnt tobacco farther down into the bowl of his pipe and put a fresh match to it; then took several deep puffs. Presently he asked: "Do we know where Stetson's living?"

"Not at the moment, but Tania will find out for us. They'll have his address at the theatre."

"Right!" said Browning. "Fetch Tania home to lunch after her rehearsal this morning and obtain the address then. But don't let her know what you want it for. To-night, while he's at the theatre and safely out of harm's way, we'll pay a brief visit to his rooms and have a look round. Quite illegal, of course, but we might find something interesting. Are you game?"

"Game? Oh, Peter," answered Prentice, gleefully rubbing his hands, "of course I am!"

"Then," smiled Browning, "Sherlock Holmes and Dr. Watson will be on the warpath to-night."

"Sherlock Holmes—and Dr. Watson!" commented Prentice dubiously. "From the way you said that, I've a suspicion that I'm Dr. Watson. And I'm not sure I appreciate being likened to that dunderhead."

"Run away," laughed Browning. "You can justify that to-night. Now I've some work to do."

VI

THE HOTEL CECIL at Alexandria may be likened to London's Savoy to the extent that at both one is just as likely to meet the Earl of Emsworth as one is an E.N.S.A. artist. The Cecil is, however, handicapped by an inability to dissociate itself entirely from a resemblance to the main hall at Euston Station. John Prentice was not surprised when Tania told him that this was where Roger Stetson was staying. It was, in any case, conveniently situated on the Corniche overlooking the Eastern Harbour hard by the Alhambra Theatre.

It was after ten o'clock in the evening when Browning and Prentice arrived at the Cecil. Whilst driving into the town in the latter's car they had agreed on their intended method of obtaining entry to Roger Stetson's room. It depended on the simple fact that guests in Egyptian hotels seldom lock their rooms. Accordingly, after figuratively taking a deep breath, both officers plunged straight up the outside steps, in through the swing doors, across the brilliantly lighted entrance hall, and up the stairs. Neither the hall porter nor the clerk at the reception desk took any more notice of them than did the numerous other visitors who thronged the hotel's public rooms at that hour of an evening.

On the second floor landing a notice on the wall indicated that rooms number 201 to 259 were to the right. Without comment they turned that way, ignored a *suffragi* standing semi-conscious half-way along the passage, turned again to the right, and, without incident, reached room number 236. After looking each way to ensure that they were unobserved, Browning knocked sharply twice. There was no reply. Gently he turned the handle and opened the door a crack. The room inside was in darkness.

"All clear, John," he said, opening the door enough

to allow Prentice and himself to enter. Then he closed the door and strode across the room to the window. He divided the heavy damask curtains and looked out. Windows stretching from floor to ceiling with external slatted shutters were open on to a narrow, iron ballustraded balcony running round the building. When he had drawn the curtains again, Browning said: "All right, John, switch on."

A click, and light flooded the room. Both officers looked around. There was nothing to distinguish it from the several hundred other bedrooms in the hotel: a single bed turned down for the night; salmon-pink pyjamas laid across it ready for wear; mosquito curtains spread over all as a shroud; heavy mahogany chest of drawers, dressing-table, and wardrobe; two easy-chairs; hair-brushes, comb, and other oddments on the dressing-table; a couple of novels by the bed. That was all, except for a portable radio set on a small table near the window.

With an exclamatory "Ah!" voiced in a tone which suggested that he had already found the incriminating evidence for which they sought, Prentice made a bee-line for the radio set, examined it closely for a moment, looked up, an expression of disappointment upon his face.

"Only an ordinary Philips broadcasting receiver, such as any one can buy in Egypt," he said.

"Does it cover the frequency of the station in Crete?" Peter asked.

"Yes, but they all do. If we'd found it tuned to that frequency it might have meant something; but it isn't."

"All right, John. Let's leave it, and see if we can find anything else."

Prentice turned away from the table by the window to answer: "O.K., Peter; but you realise we've forgotten something."

"What's that?" asked Browning.

"It's all very fine for us to get into the room so easily just because there's no key. But now we can't lock the door to stop someone coming in and disturbing us."

"Damn!" exploded Browning. "As sleuths we've not shown much foresight. What do you suggest?"

"Having been detailed for the part of Dr. Watson, surely it's not up to me to answer that one," taunted Prentice.

"All right, leave it all to father," laughed Browning. "Help me put this arm-chair against the door. If any one tries to open it, your job is to switch off the light and then nip out on to the balcony. I'll follow you, drawing the chair away from the door as I do so. We'll have to hope that whoever comes in doesn't think anything unusual's going on."

"Not a very good solution, Peter. Not up to Sherlock Holmes's standard by a long chalk. But I imagine it will do. Stetson won't return before midnight, by which time we shall be gone. The only other people who are likely to come in will be the hotel staff, and they're only Wogs."

"Then that's fixed," answered Browning. "Now to work. You go through the dressing-table. I'll do the chest of drawers."

For the next quarter of an hour the two friends were fully occupied in carefully investigating Stetson's personal effects. At the end they were forced to admit that the result in terms of suspicious evidence was, as with the radio set, precisely nothing.

"Disappointing," commented Browning. "Now, where would he hide anything incriminating?"

"We can rule out sliding panels in walls," replied Prentice cynically. "This is an ordinary hotel bedroom, not the villain's room at the haunted grange."

"But, dammit, John, he must hide things somewhere—that is, unless we're barking completely up the wrong tree."

"Which I don't believe for a moment, Peter. Come on, let's think again." Prentice clapped his hand down suddenly on the table. "I've got it! We're a *pair* of Dr. Watsons. We've forgotten to look under the bed."

"And what," asked Browning, "do you expect to find there?"

"Not what you think," retorted Prentice, saving himself from the physical assault which this shaft of wit deserved by immediately starting to explore in the place he'd suggested. "Two large suitcases," he announced. "I'll shove 'em out. We might have realised he'd have some luggage somewhere."

He emerged from beneath the bed dragging the two cases after him, stood up and brushed the dust off his clothes.

Browning said: "Let's see if we have better luck here."

The first case opened easily and was found to be empty, but the second was locked. "I think," remarked Browning, "we are justified in breaking this open."

Many things are easier said than done. A quarter of an hour elapsed before they were able to open it. Inside was a black leather brief-case marked in gold with the initials "R.S."

"Looks as if we've found something at last," commented Prentice, his face glowing with excitement.

"Yes," answered Browning; "only this damn thing's also locked. I suppose I shall have to break it open too."

"Why not take the whole thing away with us?"

"The best answer," replied Browning, after a moment's hesitation. "We haven't much time left before Stetson will be returning. Push the suitcase back and we'll clear out."

In two minutes they had restored the room to its normal appearance. As, finally, Browning pulled the arm-chair away from the door, he said: "Right, John; out light."

A click plunged the room into darkness. Browning, brief-case in hand, was just about to turn the handle of the door when he heard a sound outside. "Ssh!" he whispered.

Tense with expectancy, the two officers waited. Soft padding footsteps were coming along the corridor. And at the door of room 236 they stopped.

"The balcony, quick!" whispered Browning. Only

when they were both outside did he add: "What infernal luck. I wonder who it is."

The curtains were imperfectly drawn, with the result that there was a gap in the middle sufficient for both officers to see into the room. The light, which had been switched on again by the newcomer, revealed a dirty-looking Egyptian porter in the long ragged blue gown which is the uniform of their calling.

"I wonder what he's after?" thought Browning.

His curiosity was followed by astonishment. For the newcomer removed the soiled *tarbouche* from his head and threw it on the bed with a gesture of distaste. Then, with a sigh, he sat down in the arm-chair and stretched himself at ease.

Both Browning and Prentice could not help feeling that this was a most unusual action for an Egyptian porter. It seemed probable that the intruder was not what he seemed. This was confirmed when, from within his long garment, he withdrew an expensive-looking cigar, removed the band, and clipped the end with meticulous care before thrusting it between his stained yellow teeth and lighting it.

They did not have to wait long for the next development. Again the door opened, but this time there was no doubt as to the identity of the newcomer. It was the fair-haired, slouching figure of Roger Stetson. He was evidently not surprised to find that he had a visitor, for he spoke at once without surprise or hesitation, and only the slightest suggestion of servility in his tone: "Glad to see you again, General."

The figure in the chair made no attempt to rise, only shifted the cigar from one corner of his mouth to the other. "The pleasure is mine, *Herr* Stetson," he said, and there was a hint of contempt beneath the veneer of politeness in his tone.

"I hope," said Stetson, "your recent experience has not been too unpleasant."

"Never mind that," replied the other a trifle

brusquely. "Come, sit down. We have much to discuss."

Outside in the darkness of the veranda Browning and Prentice could scarcely believe their luck. They had obtained clear proof of Stetson's duplicity, complete with the revelation that he was not as English as he purported to be if the form in which he was addressed was any guide; it also looked as if they had unexpectedly found "General" Roderigo Carvellis.

For a moment both drew back from the window curtains, and Prentice whispered: "Shall we go in and deal with 'em both? A rough-house with those two villains could be tremendous fun. *And* what a coup to be able to hand 'em both over to the police to-night."

Browning placed a restraining hand upon his friend's arm. "Hold on," he said. "It mightn't be as easy as all that. They're almost certain to be armed. We're not. Besides, we haven't enough evidence yet as to exactly what they're up to; in particular where Stetson comes in."

"Well, what *do* we do?"

"You go round this balcony, John, until you discover a way down by a fire escape, or, if that fails, in through some window. Find a telephone, and ring up the duty officer at Navy House and tell him to get the security police here at once. Wait for them at the hotel entrance. As soon as they arrive, tell 'em briefly what we've discovered. Then bring 'em up to this room. I imagine you can leave the rest to them."

"Right!" whispered Prentice. "But what are you going to do in the meantime?"

"Remain here, of course," replied Browning. "It'll be at least half an hour before the police arrive. If both Stetson and his pal stay here talking all that time I should learn more than enough to hang 'em both."

"Yes." Prentice hesitated, then continued: "What happens if they don't stay?"

"We shall have to do our best to follow them. Look out for either of 'em leaving the hotel whilst you're

waiting down below. And follow 'em unless you see that I'm doing so. And remember that Carvellis is the one that matters. We can catch Stetson at any time."

"How do you make that out?"

"Because, unless he smells a rat, he won't give up his part in the show. Unless I'm very much mistaken he's using it as a convenient cloak for some other form of activity."

"Right! So long, and good luck." With these whispered words Prentice slipped away into the darkness.

As soon as he had gone, Browning became only too conscious of the inadequacy of his plan of action. If Prentice had to make his way into the hotel through a window, it might be an occupied room. He might wake the occupant, who, to say the least, might object. Complications would ensue, and by the time John had succeeded in explaining himself to the hotel management much time would have been lost. Then, again, the security police might be difficult. Even assuming they could be persuaded to come to the hotel at once, they might feel that Prentice's story was insufficient justification for breaking into one of the rooms of the hotel. As to what would happen if either Carvellis or Stetson, or both, left the building before the police arrived, and he, or perhaps Prentice, had to try to follow them—well, anything might happen. Browning could not avoid the thought that they would quite likely lose both their quarries. He consoled himself with the reflection that at least it would be possible to catch Stetson—when he turned up at the theatre for the show to-morrow night, if not before. But would he? He'd just burgled Stetson's brief-case. It was only a question of time before Stetson discovered that. He'd surely suspect that, so far as he was concerned, the game was up. In which case he wouldn't come back. Ah, well, thought Browning, I suppose it's no good being so damned pessimistic. It's more than time I returned to that window and did my part of the job.

Cautiously he again looked through the gap in the curtains. Stetson was leaning heavily against the end of

the bed and gazing up at the ceiling, with a cigarette hanging limply from the corner of his mouth. Roderigo Carvellis, still reclining in the arm-chair, was speaking: "My escape in Cairo was most fortunate. It was witnessed by one of our agents, Gamma. As I was moving away from Opera House Square with the crowd he managed to contact me. He disclosed his identity by our usual method and then led me to his house. He provided me with this effective disguise, though I do not look with pleasure on the journey down here in a third-class railway carriage which it involved."

With a lazy gesture Stetson signified his sympathy with Carvellis. "The *fellaheen* must be as dirty as any form of humanity," he drawled.

The man in the chair shuddered at the recollection.

Stetson asked: "What do you intend to do now?"

"I must return to Crete as soon as possible. Unless my memory is at fault, one of our submarines is due at rendezvous X in two days' time."

Stetson nodded his assent. "The night after tomorrow," he said.

"Good!" continued the other. "It only remains for you to take me to the rendezvous."

"That will be done," answered Stetson. "Where do you intend to wait in the meantime?"

"I expect you to answer that question to my entire satisfaction," replied Carvellis, with a tinge of asperity in his voice.

"Very well," said Stetson, "I will obtain a car and take you to X to-night. You will be safe there. And it is fully stocked with food."

"Food," commented Carvellis, with interest, "is something which particularly appeals to me at this moment. I have had nothing all day that could be described as eatable. We will go at once."

He started to rise, but even as he did so there was an interruption—two discreet taps on the door, repeated twice.

Carvellis, clearly startled, ejaculated: "Who is that?"

Stetson did not answer. He strode across the room, opened the door a crack, and said softly: "*Was verlanger sie?*"

"*Ich bin Mitglied des Epsilon vereins,*" came the whispered answer.

Satisfied as to the identity of the new arrival, Stetson opened the door wider. A *suffragi*, judged by the inevitable *tarbouche* and long white *galabieh*, entered, and swiftly closed the door behind him.

Carvellis, who had relapsed back into the chair, said: "Who is this, *Herr* Stetson?"

"Our agent, Epsilon."

"Such a visit is surely a little unwise."

"It is very unusual." Stetson turned to the newcomer and asked in German: "Why have you come? You know it is forbidden, except in special circumstances."

Speaking in the same tongue, the agent called Epsilon answered: "Early yesterday Bedouin thieves held up a car on the desert road to Cairo. They were after money. They found a British naval officer with nothing more than a bag of official correspondence. But they guessed there might be a market even for that. They took it to Suliman Daub in the Muski. Suliman is a friend of mine. When I received the bag from him this morning I realised it might contain much that would be useful to our cause. I decided I was justified in bringing it to you at once. Besides," he continued in an oily tone, "Suliman demanded a high price for the bag. I must have money."

"Where is the bag?" asked Stetson.

The agent rubbed his hands together. "Suliman's price was very high," he said.

Roderigo Carvellis sprang from his chair, strode across the room, thrust his face within a few inches of the agent's own and glared. Though physically he was the smaller man, there was no doubting Roderigo's dominating personality when he snapped: "Where is the bag?"

The agent cringed and shrank back. From the all-concealing folds of his garments he drew a small white canvas sack, the neck of which was secured with string

and a lead seal. As Carvellis took it, Stetson handed the agent a pile of notes which he had extracted from his pocket-book. "Fifty pounds," he said.

There was a rapacious gleam in the agent's eyes as he almost grabbed the money. Yet, as he did so, he almost whimpered: "Only fifty, why I paid Suliman——"

He did not finish his sentence. Again Roderigo Carvellis had advanced towards him. "You paid Suliman Daub just ten pounds," he hissed. "Get *out!*"

The agent who was called Epsilon shrank back. He could not withstand the bloodshot eyes of the man who faced him. They seemed to pierce his brain. They had divined his secret. Suddenly he turned, swiftly slipped through the door, and was gone.

Stetson said: "Epsilon is always troublesome over money. That's the real reason why he came to see me to-night. That bag was not worth such a risk. I fancy he will have to be replaced by someone who is more reliable. By the way, how did you know he paid so little to Suliman Daub?"

Carvellis smiled as he answered: "It is my business to know everything which should be known, *Herr* Stetson."

The watching Browning was little interested in the agent Epsilon. He was clearly small fry. Of greater interest in the conversation he had overheard was the revelation that the tentacles of Carvellis appeared to spread through Stetson to a number of minions in Egypt who were identified by letters of the Greek alphabet. But overshadowing this was the astonishing good fortune which had resulted in him locating the missing correspondence, including, in particular, the draft treaty. He had heard about the robbery earlier in the day from Prentice, but at the time had little dreamed that it was a matter with which he would become concerned. Another point: the agent's visit had delayed the departure of Carvellis and Stetson; with any luck, would detain them until the security police arrived on the scene even if Prentice experienced some of the difficulties in obtaining

them he had envisaged. Browning wished he could somehow, obtain the bag before it was opened and the nature of its contents revealed, but this was out of the question. Already he could see through the crack in the curtain that Carvellis had cut the string round the neck with a pocket-knife. Then he held the sack upside down over the table and shook it. A score of official buff envelopes of various sizes fell out.

Stetson watched with interest whilst Carvellis glanced at the addresses on each of the envelopes in turn. He singled out two as being of perhaps more than passing interest—the one for its address, the other for its size. The former, addressed personally to His Britannic Majesty's Ambassador in Cairo, he slit open and extracted the single folded sheet. Apparently it was, after all, not as interesting as he had hoped. For, after reading it rapidly through, he allowed it to fall through his fingers on to the table. And in its stead he took up the other and very much larger envelope.

Stetson—and, through the crack in the window curtain, Browning—watched him open it and withdraw a bulky document of many foolscap pages tied round with a length of white tape. He turned over a couple of pages, and then allowed a low whistle to escape through his teeth.

"So," he said, "this is most interesting! I think, perhaps, our friend Epsilon has done better than he thought in bringing this to you to-night. Perhaps, too, it is some compensation for the inconvenience I have suffered by being brought to the country by those two British officers, the interfering fools."

"What is it?" asked Stetson, showing some interest.

"This, *Herr* Stetson, is the draft of the new treaty which the British Government intend to negotiate with Egypt."

"And its value to us?"

Roderigo Carvellis smiled. "Under my leadership," he said, "the E.P.I.R.E.S. have established themselves in such strength in Crete that the Greek Government

threaten to ask for the help of British troops. That would be disastrous for us. Therefore I must ensure that British forces in the Middle East are otherwise occupied. Before I left Crete—accidentally, but, I now believe, providentially—I had already decided that the time had come to arrange such a preoccupation. I rather think this treaty will provide it.”

Since it was clear from the expression on Stetson's face that he did not understand, Carvellis explained, somewhat irritably: “Any treaty acceptable to both British and Egyptian Governments at the present time is sure to fall short of the demands of some factions of the opposition. They will not be satisfied with anything less than the surrender of British sovereignty in the Sudan, in addition to the withdrawal of all British forces from Egypt. Once the new treaty is signed, their hands will be largely tied; but if they obtain foreknowledge of its—to them—unsatisfactory terms, they will persuade the people that they are being betrayed. I believe that the resulting clamour against the Government will lead to a general uprising of the suppressed *fellaheen* against the rich *pashas*.”

Stetson considered Carvellis's statement carefully before at length he answered: “Yes, I see what you're driving at. It would be easy enough to pass the treaty to the right quarter. Suliman Daub would do that for me. But I'm not sure about the results. There'd be a commotion—students' risings and so on, certainly. But civil disturbance on a scale sufficient to tie down British troops—well, I'm doubtful. One would want something more to be sure of that.” As an afterthought he added: “It would be a pity to waste the treaty.”

The incongruous figure in the chair, still clad in the long blue garb of a porter, nodded his head slowly. “Maybe,” he said in his vile accent, “there is some sense in what you say, *Herr* Stetson. It *would* be a great pity to waste this document which has so fortuitously come into our hands. I must devise a way which will

ensure not only a flare-up, my friend, but a real blaze. This treaty is the fuel. All we require is the match."

The self-satisfied Roger Stetson had been preening himself. Through his minions he had that evening been able to lay before the man whom he served an extremely valuable document. He attributed it entirely to his own skill. Wherefore he was piqued to hear Carvellis refer to it as a fortuitous find. He found it most galling to have his labours thus depreciated. But he did not dare voice these thoughts. He could only comment sarcastically: "Perhaps you will find your match among the rest of the correspondence. One fortuitous find surely deserves another."

If Carvellis was conscious of Stetson's sarcasm he did not display it. He rose from his chair and walked over to the table on which the various letters from the courier's bag were lying, began opening them in turn and scanning their contents. The result appeared to afford him no satisfaction until, at the end, he picked up the personal letter from Vice-Admiral Pulgrave to the British Ambassador, which previously he had dismissed as only dealing with social matters.

Browning, his eye still glued to the opening in the curtains for fear that he should miss one iota of the scene being enacted within, saw Carvellis glance once again at the single sheet of the Admiral's notepaper, saw him suddenly look up and stare at the ceiling as if an idea had struck him, then look down again at the letter and begin to read a part of it aloud: "The *Colossus* will be at Alexandria for four days. After that she goes east through the Suez Canal to India, Australia, New Zealand. She is on a world cruise by way of showing off our newest battleship to the Empire. . . ." His voice tailed off.

Stetson asked casually: "What's the idea?" Again the smile on Carvellis's face. "The *Colossus*," he said slowly, "goes east through the Suez Canal, *Herr* Stetson. That is the idea."

Stetson was baffled. "I don't get it," he said.

"You will, my friend, you will," came the sardonic

answer. "Maybe you thought I was a fool taking your suggestion that I should look for another fortuitous find, as you sarcastically put it, in that correspondence. It is time, *Herr* Stetson, that you realised that Roderigo Carvellis is no fool. I *have* made another fortuitous find. This is the match which shall set the Arab world ablaze." And he held the Admiral's letter irritatingly close to Roger Stetson's nose.

It was clear to the watching Browning that Carvellis's idea concerning the *Colossus* was as inexplicable to Stetson as it was to himself. For a moment he hoped that the man would ask for more information, since it was clearly of considerable importance. But even if the puzzled Stetson had intended to ask further questions, Browning was doomed to disappointment. For, before he could do so, Carvellis suddenly snapped: "Now, enough of this. It is late and I require food. Let us go."

And he said it in such a way that Stetson only acquiesced with the words: "Very well, General."

Browning was faced with a difficult decision. In spite of the time Carvellis and Stetson had remained in conversation, John Prentice had failed to turn up with the police. Hell's bells, why not? What *was* John doing? It looked as if he, Browning, would have to do something himself—either follow them, hoping to obtain help later; or attempt to nobble them both now. For a brief moment he seriously considered the latter alternative, but hesitated at the thought that it meant two against one—not because he wasn't prepared to tackle such odds, but because the results, if he lost, were too serious. He was the only one who knew so very much that was of the utmost importance to the British authorities. Discretion, surely, was here the better part of valour. He must safeguard that information—which meant himself—until he could report it to his superiors. Wherefore he decided that the correct action was to follow the two occupants of the room. He knew that they were going to what Carvellis called Rendezvous X. If he could find out where that was the rest would be simple. There would be time and to spare

for him to report everything, and for Carvellis to be arrested before his submarine could arrive to take him off. Stetson, of course, could be picked up any time. Which reflections occupied Browning until the two men had left the bedroom, Stetson turning off the light and plunging the room into darkness as he went out in the steps of his master.

Stetson's brief-case in hand, Browning at once moved swiftly along the balcony to the next window which was open. He entered, felt rather than saw his way across the room to the door, and then cursed his luck, for, of all the unexpected things, it was locked. He returned to the balcony and moved along to the next window. Voices inside showed that the two occupants of the room were awake. That way was out of the question. The shutters of the next four windows were all barred. Damn!

He turned the corner of the building, and at last found both an open window and beyond it an open door. Realising that he had already lost valuable time, he practically threw himself down the stairs to the ground floor. The entrance hall was dimly lit by a single electric bulb. The night porter slept at the reception desk, his head resting on his arms. Otherwise it was empty.

After a brief glance round, Browning strode across to the swing entrance doors and passed through. The steps, the pavement, the street—all alike were deserted so far as the eye could see in the darkness. There were no cars parked outside. Well, that didn't signify. Stetson had quite possibly parked his car round the back. Carvellis and Stetson seemed to be taking longer to come downstairs than he'd expected. Or, perhaps, they'd gone down some backstairs and out another way.

Browning rushed back inside the hotel, through the hall, up the stairs, along the passage to Stetson's room. He confirmed that it was still empty. He made a rapid search of the corridors on the first and second floors, followed by a tour of the darkened public rooms below. All were empty, and there appeared to be no way, other than the main staircase and entrance, which the fugitives

could have used. He awoke the night porter, who said that no one had gone out. Since, however, he was unaware of the fact that Browning had done so only five minutes before, it was clear that he'd been asleep for some time, and that, in consequence, his evidence was entirely unreliable. There seemed little doubt that Carvellis and Stetson had been so swiftly off the mark that they'd left the hotel before Browning had reached the entrance for the first time. Peter swore. "Damn," and again "Damn"—and a good deal more. Irritation was turning into anger. Blast that locked bedroom door and the other obstacles which had delayed his way down from the balcony. Blast the night porter for being such a stupid fool. And blast the police for their failure to arrive.

Once again Browning walked out of the hotel. He lit a cigarette and inhaled deeply. His anger died down. Clearly he could do no more now than assume that John Prentice was succeeding where he had failed. That, as they had arranged, John had been waiting in the hall for the police to arrive, had seen Carvellis and Stetson leave the hotel and had followed them. In which case John might want to contact him—perhaps by phone—at any time. There was only one place where he'd expect to be able to do that—Spinney Villas. Without further hesitation Browning walked up to Ramleh Station and found a taxi.

Half an hour later he was back at his house. He glanced at his watch. It was after one. Wondering whether he could safely turn in, for he was undeniably weary, he sat down in one of the deep arm-chairs and in his mind began to run over the events of the evening; to consider the results of his private sleuthing; to wonder whether he ought to wake up the S.O.I. or the Chief of Staff and report what had occurred, in particular all that he had overheard; or whether to await news of Prentice before doing that. He decided on the last alternative. For it could not be long before he heard something from him. John would be successful where he had failed. A

good chap was John—would never let him down over such an important matter. . . .

Browning was startled out of his rambling thoughts by the telephone bell. He leaped from his chair across the room and seized the instrument. "Hallo!" he said. "Commander Browning speaking."

A matter-of-fact voice answered him: "Duty Officer, Navy House, speaking, sir. I thought you ought to know that Lieutenant-Commander Prentice won't be coming back to-night. I've just had word from the Officer of the Watch, H.M.S. *Nile*, that he was arrested by the naval patrol an hour ago."

"Arrested!" echoed Browning. "What on earth for?"

"I gathered he was mixed up in some sort of a disturbance at the Cecil, sir. I understand they'll be keeping him in the *Nile* until the Commander's had time to go into the matter in the morning."

But Browning did not hear that last sentence. He was already slowly lowering the receiver from his ear. Prentice arrested for being mixed up in a disturbance at the Cecil! The implications were many, but one which mattered more than any other stood out all too clearly. John was *not* on the trail of Carvellis and Stetson. Doubtless by now they were both safely at this Rendezvous X, the whereabouts of which was a complete mystery, and seemed likely now to remain so until it was too late.

•

VII

SHORTLY AFTER nine o'clock next morning a small conference took place in Vice-Admiral Pulgrave's office. The Admiral himself sat at his desk, fly-swat in hand. Every now and again he interrupted proceedings by attempting with varying success to commit an execution with this instrument. Standing in a semicircle facing him were his Chief of Staff, Captain "Pants" Kelly, his Staff Officer Intelligence, Major Penn, together with Peter Browning and John Prentice.

Browning opened proceedings by giving the Admiral a full report of his activities of the night before. He finished by saying: "Prentice turned up at eight o'clock this morning, sir. Perhaps it would be best if he told you what happened after he left me last night."

"Yes, yes," said the Admiral, somewhat testily, for it was an hour at which Flag Officers are entitled to a liver.

"Well, sir," replied Prentice, with a somewhat chastened expression, "I'm afraid my part in the proceedings was a fiasco. When I left Browning on the balcony of the Cecil I looked for a fire-escape. There didn't appear to be one, so I tried the first open window. The room was in darkness. As I didn't know whether it was occupied, I tiptoed across towards the door. Just as I reached it, a woman's voice from the bed nearly made me jump out of my skin. It said: 'Don't move an inch. I've got you covered.' I was so surprised I just stood stock-still. Then the light was switched on and the voice said: 'Put your hands up.' I did that, but I also looked round. Sitting up in bed was an absolute gargoyle of an old woman. But even though she was complete with a lace nightcap she was holding a revolver with a very steady hand. I started to produce some sort of an explanation for my intrusion. But she wouldn't listen.

Said something about 'It's no use, young man. I know what you're after,' and then telephoned the management. To cut a long story short, sir, the naval police were sent for, and I was taken off to H.M.S. *Nile*. And by the time my explanation had been accepted by the Commander it was morning. I'm extremely sorry I let Browning down so badly."

The Admiral burst into a hearty roar of laughter, in which the Chief of Staff joined. "Damn' good story, eh, Kelly?" he said. "That'll teach you, young man, to go bursting into the bedrooms of aged virgins in the middle of the night" More seriously he continued: "Perhaps it will also teach you—and this goes for you too, Browning—not to conduct private investigations of this sort on your own. Leave it to the security police, whose job it is. Not, mind you, that I don't think you both did a good job of work. This fellow Stetson is, I take it, as good as in the bag."

"As soon as I heard about him from Browning half an hour ago I telephoned the Chief Security Officer, sir," replied Major Penn. "He was going along to the Cecil at once. I haven't yet heard whether he's found Stetson, but, as Browning said, he's bound to turn up some time to-day for the show at the Alhambra to-night."

"That," interjected Captain Kelly, "is provided he hasn't already discovered that his brief-case has been stolen, and, as a result, smelt a rat. By the way, what was in the brief-case, Penn?"

"I've only had time for a quick glance through it, sir, and so far as I can see the contents are all purely personal papers—letters from his bank, and so on. But my staff are studying them in detail now."

"I see," said the Admiral. "Well, you'll let me know about that in due course. Have the security police any chance of getting a line on this Roderigo Carvellis? And what about these agents of Stetson's—Epsilon, Gamma, and so on? It seems to me that it's high time we collared the lot from first to last—from Alpha to Omega."

Conscious that he had made a joke, the Admiral

chuckled to himself, and then looked round to ensure that it had been appreciated by his staff. The result of his scrutiny of their faces was satisfactory. Naval officers have not acquired a world-wide reputation for tact for nothing.

"From what Browning has told us, sir," said Major Penn, "Carvellis is now waiting at Rendezvous X—about which we know unfortunately nothing."

The Chief of Staff interjected: "Not quite nothing, Penn. Since a submarine can reach it, it must be along the coast. And since Carvellis went there last night, it's reasonable to assume that it's not more than a hundred miles from here."

"True, Kelly," nodded Admiral Pulgrave. "What do you say to that, Penn?"

"That it can be within a hundred miles in either direction, sir. And to the east, that means the Delta. To find a man somewhere along that intricate coast is worse than looking for the proverbial needle in a haystack. But," the S.O.I. added hastily, "I've search parties out all the same."

The Admiral nodded his approval. "Good!" he said. Then he turned to his Chief of Staff: "What about establishing an off-shore patrol, Kelly? We ought to try and catch the submarine."

Browning interjected: "She's not due until to-morrow night, sir."

Admiral Pulgrave disliked being prompted. "I know," he said, somewhat testily.

Captain "Pants" Kelly hastily intervened: "The Twenty-Ninth Division's all we have available. We could send them out—er, to-morrow, sir. Not much use before."

"Possibly not." The Admiral paused to deliver a blow with his swatter upon a fly which, like many another of its breed, had had the temerity to settle on his blotting-pad. Then he continued: "That'll give us time to think out exactly what the destroyers are to do if they find the thing."

Prentice was rash enough to offer a suggestion: "Depth-charges, sir——"

The assembled officers were not to know exactly what Prentice had in mind, for the Admiral interrupted with the acid comment: "We are not at war now, Prentice. Our ships cannot go about depth-charging foreign submarines even if their activities are highly suspect. Heavens, we don't want a first-class international incident."

"Pants" Kelly intervened: "I'll have a word with the R.A.F., sir, to see how many aircraft can be made available to join the hunt."

"Yes, of course. They ought to go out at sunset. Their best chance of success will be during the night, when she's likely to be on the surface."

"Unless she's fitted with a *schmorkel* tube, sir."

Browning offered a contribution to the discussion: "Even then, sir, she'll have to surface to-morrow night to rescue Carvellis."

But Prentice threw cold water on the idea. "Likely to be so close inshore then, sir, that aircraft will never distinguish her radar echoes from those of the surrounding land."

"You are, none of you," snorted Admiral Pulgrave, "very encouraging. You seem determined to pour cold water on everything this morning. But it doesn't alter the fact that somehow we *must* find Carvellis."

There was a discreet knock on the door of the Admiral's office, and a Marine orderly entered. Saluting, with a smart click of his heels, he announced: "Ten o'clock, sir."

"Thank you," answered Admiral Pulgrave, adding as the orderly withdrew: "Well, I must go down to the Staff meeting. Doesn't do to keep 'em waiting. We'll go into these patrols more fully afterwards, Kelly. I think that's all I want from you, Browning—and Prentice. But you might come and see me again later, Penn. I want to know more about Carvellis and Stetson

and this organisation of theirs in Egypt. It seems to be a much bigger show than we imagined."

"I've already asked G.H.Q. Intelligence to send down a full dossier, sir. I'll come along as soon as it arrives."

As the Admiral rose from his desk, he called Prentice back for a moment. "You and Penn had better put your heads together," he said, "to see if you can't make something out of those wireless signals from Crete."

John Prentice answered: "Aye, aye, sir," but in truth he saw little chance of achieving any result. That the signals were messages in code was obvious. But the first requirement for breaking down any code is a sufficient number of groups from it. And since these messages were so short, it was likely to be several weeks before that requirement was fulfilled. Apart from this, Stetson's object in displaying the daily message each evening in the course of a public theatrical performance wasn't at all clear. Well, perhaps S.O.I. would be able to help there. Prentice laid no claim to an imaginative brain, such as is the essential prerogative of the successful intelligence officer.

For Browning and Prentice the hours which followed were anxious ones. Shortly after eleven o'clock they heard from Major Penn the disturbing news that Stetson had not been found. There was no sign of him at the hotel. His bed had not been slept in, and he had not put in an appearance for breakfast or thereafter.

From Tania they knew that there was no rehearsal that day. So far as the show was concerned there was no reason for Stetson to show up until shortly before he was to go on for his act that night. And if, as seemed to be the case, he had not returned to the hotel after his departure with Carvellis, he could not know that his suitcase had been broken open and his brief-case stolen. Even if he had discovered this, there was no reason why he should imagine it was anything more than ordinary burglary. In any case, the question whether it contained anything incriminating remained an open one. The first

examination of the contents had drawn a blank, but the more thorough scrutiny by experts which was in progress might reveal something. With so many ifs, neither Browning nor Prentice should have had any cause for alarm. If Stetson failed to turn up at the theatre, it would, of course, be a different matter, but the time for that was not yet. Nevertheless, neither could suppress his natural feelings of anxiety on that score. The security police were in the meantime keeping a close watch on both the hotel and the theatre.

As for Stetson's agents, Browning and Prentice gathered from the S.O.I., insofar as he was forthcoming on the subject, that a net was being drawn round the several individuals in Egypt who were known to be responsible for subversive activities, in the likelihood that Epsilon, Gamma, and the others were among them. But for the moment they were only being watched. It had been decided not to arrest them until both Carvellis and Stetson had been located. For until then any one of the agents might easily provide a valuable clue to their whereabouts; might even lead directly to one or both of them.

By seven o'clock in the evening there was still nothing to report. The search-parties which had been sent out along the coast in each direction had achieved nothing. Stetson was still absent. And none of the watched agents had done anything which could be regarded as suspicious. Browning and Prentice considered it all very depressing; so much so that they were in no mood for the normal routine work of their respective jobs.

They returned home early in response to Prentice's comment: "There's only one thing to be done, Peter, and that's to drown our sorrows in drink. I wish we had some decent Scotch instead of this local muck."

Whilst they were drinking, Tania, a welcoming smile upon her lovely face, came down the stairs into the sitting-room. She was followed by Richard's Wren cousin, Joan Gill. The latter remarked cheerfully and without ceremony: "Forgive me if I run away at once.

I'm due on watch at eight. I'll be back about one. Keep some supper for me, Tania. So long."

She waved her hand, and with the carefree attitude of the very young woman, swept out of the room.

"What impudence," grinned Prentice when she had gone. "I'll bet she's not due on watch. More likely going out with some Pongo."

Tania smiled. "Your knowledge of a woman's psychology seems to be at fault, John dear," she said. "I've only known Joan a couple of days, but it's been quite enough for me to know that she possesses a woman's normal pride in her appearance, particularly where men are concerned. And Joan was wearing neither her best uniform nor silk stockings."

"One up to you, my dear," laughed Browning. "John fancies himself as *such* a lady-killer. I do like to hear someone pointing out that he doesn't really know all there is to be known about the fair sex!"

Tania had to protest loudly that she was in need of a drink and would have to be leaving for the theatre in a very few minutes to persuade the two officers to desist from the rough-house which followed Browning's good-natured taunt at his friend.

When John had mixed her a cocktail, she asked: "Well, and what have you been up to all day?"

"Oh, nothing of any interest," replied Browning casually.

"Which means that you are going to be secretive again. Far be it from little Tania to poke her nose in where it's not wanted." With her experience as an actress she was well able to feign annoyance. Apparently piqued, she continued: "Very well. I'll be off to the theatre. Enjoy yourselves playing secrets. *Au revoir*."

She tossed her head and turned away. In a moment Browning was across the room and between her and the door. He seized both her arms and held them to her side. "Don't, Tania dear," he said contritely. "We're being a pair of bores, I know. Forgive me."

She looked at him intently for only a fraction of a

minute. But it was enough for her to see that there was something in his eyes which she had not seen before, and womanly intuition was sufficient to interpret its meaning. Besides, she was not a child, nor inexperienced in the ways of life and the world. For that brief but revealing moment she held his eyes with hers, then drew away and turned towards John Prentice.

And with a sudden laugh she challenged them. "It all depends on whether you both behave yourselves to-night," she cried. "Who's going to take me to the theatre, and *who's* coming down to bring me home?"

The two officers glanced at each other. Each guessed that together they had reached the same conclusion. In chorus they cried: "Tania dear, we're both going to escort you down—and bring you home."

She smiled at them and blew them a kiss. "That's sweet of you both," she said; "but what are you going to do with yourselves in between? You both look as if you were up to something."

Browning nudged Prentice and said, as casually as he could manage: "We're not up to anything, Tania. We're coming to the show."

"Not again, surely, Peter dear."

Prentice said: "Oh, yes, we are, my dear." He could not resist adding: "And we're looking forward to it tremendously."

She pressed them for an explanation of Prentice's last remark, but Browning avoided the issue by pointing out that unless they left at once she would be late. And during the drive down to the theatre both officers deftly turned their conversation into other channels. They knew it would hardly be an encouragement to her performance were she to know that the particular matter to which they were looking forward was the appearance *and arrest* of Roger Stetson.

After they had dropped Tania at the stage door they drove down to the Cecil, and from the military police on duty outside ascertained that Stetson had still not returned to the hotel. Thereafter they watched the first

half of the show—Stetson's turn did not come until later—and when the lights went up for the interval they divided: Prentice to visit the hotel again—with the same result as before—and Browning to pay a visit backstage.

When they met again in the foyer Browning explained: "He's not fetched up, John, blast it! And it's almost too late for him to do so now. It looks very much as if he *has* done a bunk."

At that moment the bell rang to call the audience to their seats. And somewhat disconsolately they filed back into the lighted auditorium and to their seats in a box to the left of the stage. The conductor entered the orchestral pit and was greeted with a round of applause. As he raised his baton, that always entrancing little coloured signal-light, fitted just below the centre of the footlights, winked thrice. His baton descended and the orchestra struck up the haunting strains of "Lily of Laguna." Slowly the house lights dimmed, leaving only the footlights to cast a golden glow upon the red velvet folds of the curtain. As it rose upon a scene which featured a medley of Leslie Stuart's nostalgic melodies, Browning reflected that this was the third time he'd seen *Black and White*. Which was precisely twice more than he could remember having seen any previous show. Yet, if anything, he found himself enjoying it even more than before. The attraction, of course, was the lovely Tania, though he was only half-conscious of this.

With the last chords of "Soldiers of the Queen," the audience burst into a roar of applause. And as the orchestra struck up the lilting theme of Waldteufel's "Skaters' Waltz" for the dancers who followed, Prentice turned to his friend and interposed: "Stetson should be next turn, shouldn't he, Peter?"

"Next but one—after Tania's "Portsmouth Hard", scene."

"Oh, yes! Well, if by any chance he does come on, we might have some fun. When he asks for numbers from the audience as usual, let's shout our suggestions and try and insist that he uses 'em."

Browning commented: "It's an idea, John, but for two things. Even supposing he has managed to slip past the red caps at the stage door since the interval and avoided arrest, he'll hardly have had time to dress in that devil's get-up of his, certainly none to prepare his drawings with prearranged numbers. In which case he'll jolly well have to do 'em impromptu for once, so he might just as well use our numbers."

Prentice had to admit there was truth in Browning's remarks. He also had to add: "Even if he had the time to prepare his drawings, he might not be able to use the numbers broadcast from Crete this morning—I've got 'em by the way—since, if he's been out at Rendezvous X with Carvellis all day, he's unlikely to have been able to listen for them."

"Possibly, John," replied Browning; "but you're assuming he relies on that radio set we saw in his room. There's no guarantee he hasn't others—one at Rendezvous X, for example."

The theme song, "Home, Dearie, Home," caught their ears, and they turned once more towards the stage, Browning whispering: "Ssh! Here comes Tania."

For the next few minutes Browning, and, to a lesser degree, Prentice, were enraptured by their friend's performance. And so, too, were the remainder of the audience, judged by the enthusiastic applause, with its accompaniment of piercing whistles from the "gods", which greeted the end of the scene. Browning so far forgot his usual self-consciousness about such matters as to express his feelings audibly with the words: "She's a perfect darling!"

Prentice took advantage of the continued applause to reply in his ear, in a spirit of jest, which, in his heart, he suspected contained more than a grain of truth: "I do believe you've fallen for her."

"Nonsense!" answered Browning, with an emphasis which he feared was all too obvious even if, as he hoped, his known tendency to blush was concealed by the darkness of the auditorium. Largely with the object of

stopping Prentice from continuing such an embarrassing discussion, he commented: "This should have been Stetson's turn."

Whereupon the curtain rose to reveal, to the astonishment of both officers, the plain black curtains and the easel carrying the large sheets of paper which Stetson used for his act. Furthermore, the orchestra struck up his signature tune, "The Bells of St. Mary's."

"It looks," said Prentice doubtfully, "as if they didn't know that Roger Stetson wasn't here."

But the next moment his comment was given the lie, for on to the stage walked Roger Stetson. Or at least if not he, his living image, if one may so use that expression of one who is disguised not only in the traditional scarlet garb of Mephistopheles, but with the swarthy features, dark eyebrows, black moustache, and pointed beard associated with it.

VIII

BROWNING'S immediate reaction on seeing Roger Stetson was to whisper loudly to Prentice: "I suppose it isn't an understudy, John?"

The answer was emphatic: "Can't be. They don't have 'em for this sort of speciality act."

"Looks as if the police on watch outside the stage door have been caught napping, then."

"Don't let's worry about that, Peter. The point is that *we've got him*. Let's call in the red caps."

"You go, John. Nip out of the front and round to the stage door. Get 'em posted in the wings on each side, waiting for him to come off. I'll stay here and keep an eye on him until I reckon you're ready. He's proved himself a slippery customer once. I'm not letting him out of my sight until he's under arrest if I can help it."

"O.K., Peter."

As Prentice turned to leave the box, Browning added as an afterthought: "Give me the message you intercepted from Crete this morning, John. I might just as well check up on the figures Stetson uses to-night."

Prentice handed Browning a small piece of paper and quietly slipped away. On the stage Stetson had already started his act with his usual preliminary patter. It was designed to build up an impression that he was about to perform a particularly difficult artistic feat. It was a legitimately indirect method of leading the audience to the ultimate conclusion that in its execution he was, if not brilliant, extremely clever. As Browning watched, the lugubrious orchestral accompaniment died away. Stetson explained that he required three numbers from the audience—any numbers which they cared to suggest. And with a flourish he picked up a piece of black chalk and struck an attitude in front of the large blank sheet

of white paper on the easel in the centre of the stage: "Come on!" he cried. "A number, please, ladies and gentlemen. Any number."

In a few minutes Roger Stetson broke down the reluctance of the audience to suggest the numbers for which he asked. Somewhere at the back of the auditorium a Cockney voice called out: "Seven," and thereafter many others were forthcoming. To what extent the audience were responsible for Stetson's choice of the three figures which he chalked on his drawing paper Browning was unable to decide, for most, if not all, the ten digits were offered. But the first group was not the one on the sheet of paper Prentice had given him.

The orchestra burst into "Pistol Packin' Mama," and Stetson, turning his back on the audience, proceeded to turn the three figures into a resemblance of Betty Grable. It was now for the first time that Browning noticed that the artist was ill at ease. Normally the essence of his act was the rapidity with which he produced his pictures with great bold strokes with chalks of many colours, each executed with a lightning flourish. To-night these were missing. He drew carefully, and consequently slowly. He hesitated over the choice of colours. As a result he took too long in achieving a picture to create more than a mild impression upon his audience. Moreover, the portrait was such a travesty of the person it endeavoured to portray that it was practically unrecognisable by the audience. Stetson's performance with his second drawing was no happier; the result no better. But the audience liked hearing the sugary strains of "The Lost Chord," and applauded vigorously when Stetson at last completed his picture of the well-known B.B.C. organist seated at his instrument.

Since once again the group of figures which he used did not agree with those on Browning's sheet of paper, one might surmise that Stetson had failed to receive his instructions from Crete that morning because he had been detained too long at Rendezvous X. The same reason could explain the ineptitude of his performance. He had

had no time to prepare his drawings beforehand; without such preparation the fire went out of his sketching. But an equally possible explanation was that the performer was *not* Stetson.

Browning waited for Stetson's last burst of patter, to see him chalk up the five figures which were the basis of his final drawing, to hear the orchestra strike up "The British Grenadiers"; then he slipped out of his box and ran, rather than walked, along the passage which led to the pass-door. A moment later he was on the prompt side of the stage. Prentice had done his job well. He was waiting in the wings just behind two stalwart military policemen. And as he greeted Browning, he waved in the direction of the other side of the stage. Just visible in the shadows beyond the bright lights which shone upon the scarlet figure of Roger Stetson, two more khaki-clad figures with red caps were dimly visible.

Peter whispered: "Well done, John," only to have his attention distracted by a hand gripping his arm and a voice in his ear saying: "What are you two up to?"

He turned to see Tania standing by his side. She was dressed ready for her next number. Not even stage make-up seen at very close quarters could spoil her natural beauty and lovely charm. "We're waiting for Stetson," he answered, "but it would take too long to explain why now." And, indeed, even as he said this, "The British Grenadiers" came to an end with a prolonged tonic chord, and Roger Stetson bowed in acknowledgment of the ensuing applause.

The curtain fell, then rose again. Still in the centre of the stage, Roger Stetson bowed once more. As it fell a second time, he turned towards the prompt corner to make his exit. He had only taken three paces when he saw Browning, Prentice and the two military policeman, and he hesitated.

To both officers this was clear evidence of guilt, though they afterwards questioned the logicity of such an assumption; for had Stetson had any idea that he was under suspicion he would not, surely, have put in an

appearance that night. It could only be ascribed to an uneasiness of conscience arising from the difficulties he must have experienced in taking his master, Roderigo Carvellis, to Rendezvous X and in returning for the night's performance with all too little time to spare. But whatever the reason for Stetson's hesitation, its effect was most unfortunate.

Prentice, as always impetuous, at once cried: "Come on! Get him! Quick!" and started to lead the way on to the stage.

Then he, too, hesitated, first to assure himself that he was being followed by Browning and the police, and then because the stage manager, imagining that Stetson intended to take one more bow, raised the curtain.

The figure of Mephistopheles turned to face the audience, took one step forward, and with a breath-taking leap, jumped clean over footlights and orchestra into the centre gangway of the auditorium.

Browning was the first among the group waiting in the wings to recover from his astonishment at this unexpected act. He dashed forward on to the stage and yelled: "Stop him, somebody! Stop him!"

But his appeal fell upon deaf ears. The audience imagining, with reasonable justification, that this was all part of Stetson's turn, had reacted for once with genuine appreciative applause. And all eyes had turned to follow the flying scarlet figure as it rushed through the theatre and out through the swing doors at the back of the stalls.

Too late Browning realised that the man they sought had got the better of them; though almost at once he turned to Prentice and the police and said: "To the entrance, everyone, quick;" and led the way through the pass-door round to the front of the theatre. But by the time they reached the foyer it was empty. And it took them five minutes to ascertain from the Egyptian custodian that the fugitive had indeed passed through and left the theatre by the main entrance.

Outside in the darkness, the traffic and the crowded

pavements, it was all too obvious that the man, despite his incongruous garb, could have escaped in a dozen different directions and that pursuit was vain.

The police went off to do their best, but neither Prentice nor Browning made any attempt to follow. Instead, they stood together in the theatre entrance whilst Browning uttered a very hearty: "Damn it, John, we've been fooled again!"

"'Fraid so, Peter, and all my fault too."

"Nothing of the sort. No one could know that he'd do a bunk like that."

Prentice asked with an air of resignation: "What does 'A' do next, Peter?"

In mute reply Browning offered him his open cigarette case. And, as Prentice took one, they both laughed. For in all the circumstances it was the perfect answer, even if they were only *Players*.

But for all their mirth, each knew perfectly well that the other man was, to put it expressively, as sick as mud, at their failure to catch Roger Stetson. They discussed whether they should pay a visit to his dressing-room to see whether there was anything of interest to be found there; decided against such a move on the twofold grounds that the security police would do the job in any case, and the fact that any backstage visit now would lead to a plethora of questions from excited members of the cast, which they much preferred to avoid. Wherefore they sat in the car, sent word in to Tania via the driver, and waited until she was ready.

During the drive home they had no option in the circumstances but to tell Tania everything which had led up to Stetson's attempted arrest. And after they had reached 16 Spinney Villas and were sitting down to supper in the softly lighted, maple furnished dining-room, it was she who summed up the situation in a few brief sentences: which, if not entirely terminologically exact, were at least effective.

"It seems to come to this," she said, "the E.P.I.R.E.S. *were* a disorganised and ineffective body of

Cretan cut-throats. Six months ago this Roderigo Carvellis turned up in Crete and became their leader. He turned a rabble into an army and defied the Greek Government to turn them out of Crete. He guessed rightly they couldn't do it without help. To make sure that British forces didn't help he decided to provide a preoccupation elsewhere in the Middle East."

"But," interjected Prentice, "our security blokes weren't so dumb that they didn't know what was going on. They realised that the way to deal with the E.P.I.R.E.S. was to shanghai Carvellis."

"Which was where I came in," laughed Browning.

"Yes, Peter, dear," she smiled, "but, unfortunately, your military boy friends let him escape." More seriously she continued: "It seems that Roderigo was not without friends in Egypt. There were, in fact, quite a crowd, what with Gamma and Epsilon who were acting under Stetson. He appears to be Carvellis's principal accomplice here. At this point your naval courier was by chance waylaid on his way to Cairo and robbed of his correspondence by Bedouins. They sold the stuff to someone called Suliman Daub, who lives in the Muski. He passed it on to Stetson just in time for him to do the 'what-a-good-boy-am-I' stuff to Roderigo. And Roderigo sees in the draft of the new treaty just the opportunity he wants to create trouble in the Middle East which will tie down our troops."

"Not quite right, my dear," commented Browning. "Stetson wasn't too certain that the treaty alone would do the trick. He said something else was needed. Carvellis found that in the stolen correspondence bag, too. It was something to do with the *Colossus* going east through the Suez Canal. But don't ask me what. He wouldn't even tell Stetson that."

"That remains a mystery, I'm afraid," confirmed Prentice.

"Only one of several, it seems," Tania retorted. "But do let me finish. Roderigo went off last night to this Rendezvous X to await an E.P.I.R.E.S. submarine

which is conveniently due in there to-morrow. It's to take him back to Crete. Meantime Stetson is left with the baby in the shape of the treaty which he is to pass through Suliman Daub to the most suitable gang of Egyptian agitators. An attempt to-night—to spike his guns is, I think, the expression you'd use—has unfortunately failed——”

Seeing the chastened expression on the two men's faces, she went on cheerfully: “Oh, cheer up, you two boys. Every cloud has a silver lining. Roger may have given you the slip to-night, but he won't be able to do his dirty work so easily any longer. Why, he'll even run a big risk trying to see Suliman Daub, since the police are presumably watching him pretty closely.”

“True, my dear,” answered Browning, cheering up. “And another point. He'll no longer be able to pester you with his attentions.”

“Beastly cad!” commented Prentice expressively.

“Well,” continued Tania, “then what *are* you worrying about? Find Rendezvous X and you've got Roderigo plus the *Colossus* mystery. And find Stetson and you've got the treaty back. And all this E.P.I.R.E.S. nonsense will be finished.”

Both officers stared at Tania in speechless amazement after her last remarks, until Prentice at last exclaimed: “My God! What a woman!”

“All you men need a woman,” she answered, “to put things in their right perspective. You love making mountains out of molehills. It makes you seem so terribly important.”

“Not kind, my dear,” said Browning quickly. “Not very kind.”

“Oh, Peter,” she answered, and there was remorse as well as laughter in her voice, “I'm only pulling your legs, which in the circumstances is naughty of me. I know it's most frightfully important, really, but I just couldn't resist it.”

Prentice said: “I was thinking, Peter, that Tania

might at least justify one female characteristic—intuition—by helping us solve the number business.”

Both of them looked towards her.

“I can guess,” she answered. “These messages are in code sent by wireless from Roderigo’s headquarters in Crete.”

“Agreed,” replied Prentice, “but who to? And why on earth does Stetson display them each night for all the world to see?”

She was silent for a moment before she answered quietly: “How’s this for an explanation? The messages are made in morse, aren’t they? Well, everyone can’t read morse: certainly not all Carvellis’s agents. But Stetson can. Very well; he conveys the messages to the other agents by means of his drawings because it’s absolutely safe. They can be in the audience every night, but there is never any communication between him and them which might lead to any suspicion ever being aroused concerning Stetson. Remember, Peter, how you said that Stetson was annoyed because Epsilon came to see him last night.”

“By Jove,” said Browning, admiration in his voice, “I do believe you’ve got it, Tania. What do you say, John?”

“So do I, old boy. Tania, my dear, I believe we should leave the solution of this whole business to you. But, Peter, what do you suppose Stetson’ll do now to pass those messages on? The stage act is out from to-night.”

“Don’t ask me John,” answered Browning. “We’ll pass the idea on to S.O.I. in the morning and suggest his security boys keep an eye lifting for such groups of numbers in any form. They may provide a clue to Stetson’s whereabouts. Anyway,” and here he turned to the girl, “many thanks for such a brilliant solution.”

“You can say that, Peter,” she answered, “if and when you find I’m right. Just for now you can tell me something. Who is this Roderigo Carvellis exactly?”

“Briefly, my dear, he’s an example of what happens

when a Greek marries a Spaniard—the strains don't mix very well. He might have been a brilliantly clever scientific inventor. He chose to waste his talents on a career of crime. Before the last war he was wanted by the police of half a dozen countries for robbery, dope traffic, living on immoral earnings, the white slave racket, and heaven knows how many murders. But he was as slippery as he was clever. On the two occasions he was caught it was in the wrong country, and he knew the answers to all the extradition laws. When war broke out he disappeared from view. The assumption is that he was in one of the Axis countries, but what exactly he was doing isn't known. But we can bet on one certainty. It must have been something intended for the ultimate financial gain and personal glory of Roderigo Carvellis. Everything he does is, and he's never been content to play second fiddle."

"And that's all," Tania asked—"that is, until he turned up in Crete?"

"It is, my dear."

She shuddered as she commented: "And Roger Stetson was a friend of his. Once or twice I actually asked myself if I was being horrid to Roger by refusing to play just the way he wanted to."

"My dear," smiled Browning, "we've already this evening paid tribute to a woman's intuition."

It was a little later, after Tania had retired to bed and the two men were enjoying a final night-cap, that Prentice said: "One thing still puzzles me, Peter. If it was so important to Stetson to keep his activities secret, why on earth did he give himself away by referring to your visit to Crete in that absurd note of his?"

Browning reflected for a moment before replying. "I think there were two reasons, John," he answered. "Firstly, he may not have realised that it was being kept secret; imagined it was common knowledge. Secondly, he was so angry at the time that for once he didn't think."

"Angry!" laughed Prentice. "I should say he was.

And jealous, too. You know, Peter, I can't help feeling that he must be even more angry to-night!"

"You mean, with us?"

"Yep. And since he tried to do us in on the flimsiest of excuses that first evening we met him in Cairo, he's even more likely to do so now."

"Maybe, old boy, we'd better watch our step."

"Maybe we had, Peter. And maybe we'd better keep an eye on Tania. I don't trust Master Stetson one inch where she's concerned."

"That, John, is far more important than worrying about our two selves. I wouldn't have her harmed for all the gold in China."

And though he forswore comment, Prentice was not slow to notice the sudden intensity of Browning's tone as he made this remark. And his last thoughts as he turned in that night were of his two friends—the one a friend of his childhood days, the other an old shipmate. He smiled at the conclusion that none could be better suited as husband and wife. And since that was an event devoutly to be wished, he decided that neither Roger Stetson nor any others of Roderigo Carvellis's brood could be allowed to interfere; not if he could help it.

As for Browning, his thoughts at the same time were running along in a more practical direction. He was wondering whether the time had really come for him to turn aside, at least in part, from the mistress to whom he had so far devoted some twenty years of his life—and to take unto himself a wife. Which is a statement not so irregular as it seems, for the mistress was the great Service in which he had the honour to serve. And since it is not an easy matter on which to make a decision if one takes any thought for the prospective wife, he had reached no conclusion by the time he fell asleep.

But the Navy has not a monopoly of such a problem. Tania, too, had been thinking before she slept. And her problem was concerned with the fact that if she was to marry a naval officer, and thus embark on a life which involved constant wanderings from Portsmouth to

Chatham, to Devonport and, if she were lucky, to Malta, Simonstown, Bermuda or Hong Kong in pursuit of her husband, she would presumably have to surrender the stage career to which she was wedded.

Which only goes to show that Commander Peter Browning and Miss Tania Maitland were going through the process of what is ineptly described as falling in love.

It was not until shortly after they reached Navy House next morning that Browning and Prentice heard two pieces of news from Major Penn. Firstly, out of five individuals in Alexandria whose activities were being closely watched by the British security police, three had attended the performance of *Black and White* the night before. Which might, of course, have been only a coincidence, but which was more likely to be evidence in support of Tania's suggested reason for Stetson's display of figures. It was also evidence that these three individuals, at least, among the various doubtful characters under observation, were Carvellis's agents.

The second piece of news was not so satisfactory. In Cairo the security police had failed to get a line on he who was called Suliman Daub; for the reason that there were no less than twenty-three individuals among all the merchants and dwellers in the Muski who bore that name. The reputation of all, in so far as the records of both the Egyptian Police and the Intelligence Branch of G.H.Q. were concerned, were above reproach. And the number of men on the strength of the security police in Cairo did not permit an adequate watch being kept upon twenty-three individuals in the hopes that one might be the particular man they sought.

IX

"I AM in the mood," announced Prentice to the other residents, temporary and otherwise, of No. 16 Spinney Villas at lunch the next day, "for an afternoon off from the office. Which means that I shall not go back until about six."

"That," interjected his Wren cousin without hesitation, "is simply *splendid*, John dear. You can take me sailing. It's *such* fun in the harbour with so many ships in."

"You mean," commented Prentice in that patronising tone which one is entitled to use to a near and younger relation, "it will give you an opportunity of displaying your brown limbs clad only in an abbreviated pair of shorts to all the sex-starved sailors."

"That," she answered, "is almost offensive, young John. But," she added cheerfully, "I do look rather *nice* in shorts. David told me so."

"And who might David be? I don't seem to have heard his name before."

"David," she answered, "is Major Stanton, a friend of mine."

"Oh, Joan!" groaned Prentice. "Another Pongo!"

"You are not," she replied tartly, "to call them Pongos. I've told you that before."

"Okay," retorted Prentice with a laugh. "What will you have instead; Gezira Lighthouse?"

She ignored this reference to the country club at Cairo where polo is but one of many games played. "Are you," she asked, "or are you *not* going to take me sailing?"

"All right, Joan dear," replied Prentice, "come off your high horse and I'll take you."

Browning, who had remained silent during this exchange of badinage, turned towards Tania. "If," he

said, "I go to the office this afternoon it will leave you all alone. So I am also going to take the afternoon off."

"Should you?" she asked with a smile; "I mean, what about Carvellis?"

"Oh, hang Carvellis—and Stetson, too. I've had nothing but them all the forenoon. Besides, catching them is not my business really. Penn and his security boys are working hard, though they're not having much luck, I'm afraid. What about coming out for a drive? We might go to Aboukir. There's a good beach just beyond with grand bathing. We can laze the afternoon away swimming and sunbathing."

"That, Peter dear, would be simply delightful."

"The afternoon's arrangements are apparently carried *nem. con.*" said Prentice, adding with a trace of cynicism in his voice, "to the entire satisfaction of two members of the household at least."

"For that unnecessary comment," said Browning, "you will, I trust, be duly punished."

"I think," responded Joan, "I might manage quite easily to push him overboard this afternoon—in the middle of a nice patch of oil fuel."

Half an hour's run across the flat fields of the Delta brought Browning and Tania to the shores of Aboukir Bay. At the point where he stopped the car on the road which skirts the coast from Alexandria out to Rosetta, the sea was distant but a couple of hundred yards. And hand in hand he and Tania stepped across the scrub-covered sand to the shore.

It was the afternoon of a Mediterranean summer day. The sky was a delicate shade of blue. Across it, dainty wisps of feathery white cloud were driven by the wind which blew in their faces, heightening the colour in Tania's cheeks and blowing out her golden hair after the fashion of a Greek goddess. In the great bay which lay before them the sea was in the distance a deep azure, but nearer land it changed to a muddy brown in eloquent testimony to the rich sediment of the River Nile, whose mouths were so close at hand. And the beach itself was to

left and right so far as the eye could see a deep yellow, which glistened in the glare of the afternoon sun.

Tania sighed with contentment. "It's perfectly lovely here, Peter. It makes one feel good to be alive."

"It's a relief to be away from the heat and noise of the town," he answered. "Let's undress."

After they had bathed and were lying revelling in the luxurious ease of the warm soft sand, Browning was for a while silent as he reflected upon her beauty—Eton-blue eyes, golden hair, skin like a peach that has ripened on the hot wall of a Liza Lehmann garden, teeth much better than any pearls, ankles that you could span with thumb and middle finger, height a bit above the average man's heart, and a voice sweeter than any cooing dove. Reflecting thus the thought that he loved her forced itself into his conscious mind. But because he was neither young nor inexperienced in the ways of human nature, caution reminded him that as yet he knew singularly little about her.

Wherefore he said: "Tell me, Tania, if I may be allowed to ask such a question, how long have you been on the stage?"

"Nearly ten years," she answered.

"Great Scot," he exclaimed. "You're not as old as all that!"

"Oh yes, I am. I'm twenty-eight."

"You don't look it," he said.

"Which is why I'm not afraid to confess it," she answered.

"How did you start?" he asked. Adding in all innocence, "Did you go to the R.A.D.A.?"

She replied with a silvery laugh: "Good heavens, no! I saw an advertisement one day saying that show-girls were wanted for a West End theatre. In my innocence I went along to the address given for an audition. A nasty little Jew pinched me four times, pulled up my skirt, and muttered: 'Legs not so dusty.' Then he blew his beastly cigar in my face, patted my cheek, and said, 'You'll do, dearie.'"

"The dirty little beast," interjected Browning with some feeling.

"He told me to go to the Oxford Theatre for a rehearsal. I was so terrified that I didn't dare refuse, not even when I discovered that the Oxford was as far from the West End as Camden Town. I stayed there exactly one week, loathing every minute. Everything about it seemed so sordid. That nearly ended my stage career. But a fortnight later I received a letter asking me to attend an audition at the Palladium. I decided to give it a try. They said I'd been spotted at the Oxford and they wanted to give me a chance. At first I was only a show-girl, but later I was given a small part."

"Since when you've never looked back," commented Browning.

"More or less," she answered, "but I've been lucky."

"I can't think why I never saw you in a show," he remarked. "I suppose I must have been abroad too much."

"More likely you just didn't notice me," she laughed.

"Of course I should have," he bridled. "But, tell me, what made you come abroad?"

But this was a question she was not then destined to answer. Engrossed in each other, neither Peter nor Tania had observed the silent approach of an Egyptian *felucca* from seaward until they were disturbed by a chorus of discordant Arabic cries as its brown sail was lowered and the crew climbed out, waded ashore, and began to haul the varnished hull upon the beach.

Sitting up suddenly to gaze at the source of the interruption, Tania asked: "What are they doing, Peter?"

"Fishing, I expect," he answered. "Let's go and have a look."

They scrambled to their feet and ran down to the water's edge. And it was whilst they were watching the landing of the fish that Tania suddenly drew Browning's attention to seaward.

"Look out there, Peter," she said. "I hadn't seen it before. Is it an island?"

"Why, yes. That's Nelson's Island."

"That seems an odd name."

"It's most appropriate."

"I don't see why."

"When Napoleon was baulked by the British Fleet from invading England, he sent his armies to Egypt, as the first stage on the road to India, just as a hundred and fifty years later Hitler sent Rommel. But like Rommel, Napoleon failed to secure his lines of communication with Europe. Just as Rommel was defeated at Alamein for want of the supplies which had been sunk by our ships and aircraft, so the Emperor's armies were defeated. Nelson came one evening to Aboukir Bay and found the French Fleet at anchor. Before dawn it had been destroyed."

"So this is where the Battle of the Nile was fought?" she queried.

"Exactly—less than a hundred miles from Alamein."

"The Battle of the Nile," she echoed. "That means a lot to you, doesn't it?"

"To the British Navy, yes. It's part of our great history—an important part."

She was infected by his enthusiasm. "Oh, Peter," she said, "do let's go and have a look at Nelson's Island."

"I don't think there's much to be seen," he answered.

"Only the remains of an old fort."

"Have you been there?"

"As a matter of fact, no."

"Then you simply must. Come on."

He placed a restraining hand upon her arm. "Not so easy, my dear," he said. "We've no boat."

But she was not to be dissuaded. "Perhaps we could ask those fishermen to take us."

Without further ado she engaged the crew in conversation. With that facility which is given to many women she had soon struck a bargain with them despite a mutual lack of knowledge of each other's languages. Five

minutes later Tania and Peter, having first gathered up their clothes, were sailing towards the island.

Twenty miles to the westward Joan Gill and John Prentice had embarked in a trim little red-sailed dinghy belonging to the English Boat Club for a sail among the assorted ships of every shape and size lying at their berths in Alexandria Harbour. The carrier *Inflexible* lay cheek by jowl with the new 45,000-ton battleship *Colossus*. There were several destroyers secured to buoys in pairs. Frigates and corvettes, three abreast, filled the sides of their depot ship, the *Marlborough*. Merchant ships, with the continuous rattle of winches and derricks, unloaded their cargoes into barges or filled their holds from the crowded wharves. And in between scurried ships' motor boats, brown-sailed *feluccas* and other local craft, and the little "class" boats, with their snow-white or pillar-box red sails, belonging to the several yacht clubs.

Quite early in the afternoon the attention of John and his companion had been attracted by the sight of a large destroyer with lattice mast and single squat funnel entering the harbour from seaward. As she had turned to come up to her buoy, there to stop amidst a swirl of white foam as her turbines went astern, Joan had asked: "What ship is that, John?"

Interpreting the large white symbols "H63" painted on each bow, he answered: "The *Westminster*. She's just come from Malta, where she's been refitting."

As Prentice tacked their dinghy across the destroyer's bows, Joan watched with interest the work of the blacksmith, who, perched precariously on the cylindrical buoy, was engaged in the task of securely shackling the destroyer's cable to its ring.

An idea suddenly struck her, for she said: "Isn't the *Westminster* Henry's ship, John?" She referred thus to Lieutenant-Commander Henry Hardcastle of His Majesty's Navy who commanded this particular King's ship.

"Yes."

But Prentice need not have answered. For a bronzed and smiling figure was already waving his cap to them from the destroyer's bridge. And Lieutenant-Commander Hardcastle followed up this form of greeting with a shout amplified to stentorian proportions by the loud hailer. "Give me half an hour to shift, Joan, and then come aboard to tea. And bring John with you."

He was not the least abashed that this invitation could be heard by all the ships in the harbour within a radius of half a mile. And, fortunately, he did not hear the choleric comments of the captain of the *Inflexible*, whose afternoon slumbers were thus rudely disturbed.

Joan did not bother to ask whether her cousin wanted to accept this invitation. She waved delightedly back, and for a moment stood up in the boat to shout: "Of course, Henry, lovely!" though it is doubtful whether her shrill treble carried the distance successfully.

The next moment she was peremptorily ordered by Prentice: "Sit down, Joan! You'll capsize the boat." And when she had complied he added: "I wish you wouldn't hail your boy friends on board their ships like that, Joan. It's really not done."

"Not done," she laughed. "Nonsense, John. Besides, Henry hailed me first. What you really mean is that you're embarrassed."

Which was as true a comment as it was a cousinly remark, but, since Prentice was not prepared to admit the criticism, he did not pursue the point. Instead, he put the boat about and commented: "We'll run down towards Mex and back."

As the boat tacked to the westward, Prentice studied his cousin as she sat perched upon the weather gunwale, foresheet in hand. He was secretly rather proud of her. She might not be exactly beautiful: her face was freckled, her nose rather snub and her hair ginger. Her figure might not be slim; if anything it tended to be the reverse. But she was certainly attractive in a jolly way.

After half an hour the dinghy closed the destroyer and

ran alongside the gangway. Henry Hardcastle, a bluff member of the Navy's salt-horse fraternity, who appeared to treat the task of commanding a two thousand ton destroyer no more seriously than he had as a snotty handled a twenty-ton picket-boat, greeted them warmly and escorted them below to his cabin.

After tea, and a little after five o'clock, there was a loud knock on the door. In response to Henry Hardcastle's brusque "Come in," and after a considerable disturbance created by the heavy brushing of boots upon the doormat in the flat outside, a somewhat flustered signalman, cap in hand, entered the cabin. With the words: "Signal, sir," he handed his captain a single sheet of paper.

Hardcastle glanced at the contents, emitted an audible groan, and then exclaimed: "Damn! No peace for the wicked! Listen to this," and he read the contents of the signal.

Westminster. From F.O.L.E.M.

Immediate: Raise steam for full speed with all despatch.

Report when ready to proceed. Orders follow.

Hardcastle added the comment: "And the kettles haven't had time to come off the boil yet. What a life! Wonder what's in the wind?" To the signalman he said: "Show this to the First Lieutenant and the Engineer Officer and ask them both to speak to me at once."

But the rating had not quite finished his mission. "Commander Walton's on the phone from Navy House, sir; wants to speak to you."

Grabbing his cap, Hardcastle exclaimed brusquely: "Why on earth didn't you say so before, man!" With a muttered, "Forgive me, you two, for a moment," he hurried out of the cabin.

Reluctantly Prentice rose from his chair, remarking: "Come on, Joan, we must go. We shall be in the way."

"Why?" she asked.

"Why!" he exclaimed. "Because, dear innocent, this ship is going to sea and in a hurry at that!"

Further conversation was cut short by the arrival of a seaman messenger. "Beg pardon, sir," he said, "but the Captain says would you come up to the wheelhouse a minute and speak on the phone."

Why on earth! thought Prentice as he hurried forward and climbed the ladder up to the forecandle deck, passed inside the superstructure and up into the wheelhouse.

Hardcastle was speaking on the shore telephone. He turned as Prentice entered and placed his hand over the instrument. "It's your S.O.O. on the line, John. He asked me if I'd seen you by any chance, and I said you were aboard. He wants to know where Commander Browning is. The Admiral wants him at once. Have you any idea?"

"I imagine," said Prentice, "he's out somewhere near Aboukir. That's where he said he was going."

Hardcastle repeated this piece of information into the telephone. It was apparently not very satisfactorily received. He heard Hardcastle suddenly say in that respectful tone of voice due to one's seniors: "Yes, sir, he's here. Aye, aye, sir."

Hardcastle said: "The Admiral's on the phone now; wants to speak to you."

Prentice took the instrument. He heard the Admiral's distant voice: "Prentice, when do you expect Browning back?"

"At about six, I think, sir."

"Damn! Probably be too late. Most unfortunate he's out this afternoon."

"Why, sir, what's happened?"

"Last night, after Stetson's escape, the police impounded all his belongings from the hotel. Experts have been examining 'em ever since. This afternoon they found, concealed in the heel of one of his shoes, a map which gives the position of Rendezvous X."

Prentice inevitably asked: "Where is it, sir?" But the Admiral did not reply. Instead he continued: "I'm

sending the *Westminster* out to join the Twenty-Ninth Division. We've a real chance of catching this submarine now, and the more ships on the job the better. But first I want the *Westminster* to close the rendezvous and land a small party in the hopes of finding the man we're after. And it would help a lot if Browning were there to identify him."

"But I can do that," interjected Prentice.

"Great Scot. I'd forgotten that!" answered the Admiral. "Stay on board, then, and go out in the *Westminster* unless Browning should turn up in time. Tell Hardcastle that I'm sending detailed orders down as soon as possible. I'm expecting him to be clear of the harbour by seven."

Shortly before six Joan Gill, protesting to the last, left the ship alone. At six-thirty, John Prentice, in uniform borrowed from Lieutenant-Commander Hardcastle—for he had been sailing in no more than a shirt and khaki shorts—followed his friend up to the bridge.

The First Lieutenant reported: "Ship secured for sea, sir!"

"Any absentees, Number One?"

"No, sir. Managed to catch the liberty men at the dock gates and turn 'em back."

"Good work! Sorry they've been done out of a run ashore among the fleshpots of Egypt, though. You can tell 'em they'll have another chance in a day or so."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The Lieutenant (E) reported: "All ready in the engine-room, sir. Ship has steam for twenty-five knots."

"How much longer for full speed, Chief?"

"Half an hour, sir."

"Good work!"

He looked over the fore-end of the bridge. From the little group on the forecastle he heard the report from one of his lieutenants: "All ready on the forecastle, sir."

To the Yeoman of Signals the Captain said: "Ask permission to proceed in execution of previous orders."

"Aye, aye, sir."

The Yemoan turned and barked an order. A red and white pennant above two square signal flags fluttered to the masthead. There was a minute's pause whilst the Yeoman, through his glasses, watched the mast of the signal station ashore at Ras-el-Tin. A red flag marked with a white cross ran up.

"Permission to proceed, sir!"

Down the voicepipe to the wheelhouse Hardcastle ordered: "Obey Telegraphs. Wheel amidships."

He waited just long enough for these orders to be repeated before calling out over the fore-end of the bridge. "Slip." On the forecastle, the blacksmith smote the blake-slip, which secured the slip-rope, once with his hammer. Then he jumped clear as the wire snaked its way out through the bull-ring in the eyes of the ship.

"All gone forward, sir," came the cry.

Hardcastle spoke again into the voicepipe: "Half-speed ahead port. Slow astern starboard. Starboard twenty."

There was a slight tremor underfoot, a momentary puff of black smoke from the destroyer's funnel, a rise in the pitch of the sound from the boiler-room fans as the *Westminster* turned to starboard and began to gather way. Once in the main channel, speed was increased to twelve knots, and course set for the entrance between the breakwaters and for the open sea beyond. It was nearly sunset when they cleared the Great Pass, and Hardcastle handed over the ship to the officer of the watch.

"Now, John," he said, "in a minute we'll go down to the chart-house and settle the details of to-night's operation. But first I want a word with my Number One."

When, in response to a message, the First Lieutenant appeared on the bridge, Hardcastle said: "Number One, we shall want two things this evening: an armed party ready to land in the whaler in about an hour's time; and pistols fitted in our depth-charges. I'm going to do some live depth-charge practice to-night."

"Just one charge, sir?" The First Lieutenant knew

that once every six months they were allowed to drop a single live depth-charge for practice.

Hardcastle answered him cheerfully: "No, Number One. All of 'em. It's all right," he added, as he saw the puzzled expression in his junior's face. "There's method in my madness. We haven't suddenly declared war or anything rash like that; but I gather that with a little judicious depth-charge practice to-night we may be able to prevent one!"

It was perhaps half-past four when Tania and Peter landed on Nelson's Island from the *felucca*. She assured him that the owner of the vessel had agreed to wait, and in due course take them back to the mainland. At any other time he might have required a better guarantee than this of an Egyptian's reliability. But in love men are often blind, which explains why the need for this most necessary precaution never crossed his mind. And since he was already with Tania within the walls of the ruined fort by the time the *felucca* was heading shorewards without them, he did not see its departure, nor was he worried by anything so disconcerting.

The fort made up for its ruined state by its considerable extent. Its tumbled-down embrasured stone walls surrounded the greater part of the sandy rock-strewn surface of the island, which was in all, perhaps, two acres in size. For a time Tania and Peter strolled round the walls, occasionally pausing to look at one of the rusty iron cannon which spoke silently of the time when the island had been an important outpost in Egypt's defence. Eventually they came to the westernmost corner, where there were the remains of a couple of buildings. Whereat Browning commented: "This must be where the crew of the fort were quartered," and would have passed by. But Tania said: "Let's look inside."

Turning to comply with her wish, he passed through the doorway of the nearest building without appreciating that she had turned into the other. He glanced idly round. The roof had clearly been missing for many years, for

the walls were well weathered by exposure to the elements. The trace of some sort of an inscription on the wall in one corner attracted his attention.

Intent on this, he was hardly conscious of the purport of her words when he heard Tania's voice: "I believe there's a dungeon under here, Peter. There are steps leading down to it. I'm going to explore."

Browning's attempt to decipher the marks on the wall were unsuccessful, and his tour of inspection being finished, he crossed to the other building, intending to rejoin Tania. Simultaneously with the realisation that she was not within the four ruined walls, the meaning of her last words came home to him. Seeing the steps leading down into the ground to which she had obviously referred, for she had dropped her bathing-dress beside them, he walked over and called: "Tania!"

There was no answer. He called again a little louder: "Tania!"

Still no answer. Odd. Dropping his own bathing-drawers beside Tania's costume, he started walking down slowly, for the steps were much worn. At the bottom there was just sufficient light to see a narrow passage sloping away into the darkness.

He called again. Still no answer.

He began to grope his way forward along the passage. He could not imagine why Tania did not answer, unless she'd gone farther than he imagined. No, that was impossible in the time.

A disturbing thought crossed his mind. She'd had an accident. Somewhere in the darkness there must be a trap of some sort for the unwary: a hole in the floor; a well, perhaps. Therefore he must be very careful.

He was worried about her now, but he was also sure that it would do no good if he made a false step. He moved forward, very cautiously testing the ground with each foot before he put his weight upon it. And as he went, he felt all the time the walls on each side of the passage for possible openings or a turning. And, sure enough, after ten paces, he came to an opening on his

left. Though his eyes were accustomed to the darkness by now, there was insufficient light for him to see inside. He called Tania's name again. The result was no better than before. Should he go to the left or straight on? Undecided, he hesitated; and the answer was decided for him. He was suddenly hurled by some obviously human agency through the opening with such violence that he collided with the far wall and collapsed semi-dazed in a heap on the floor. His angry reaction was as immediate as the circumstances permitted. But as, cursing, he scrambled to his feet in the dark, he heard the pregnant sound of a door slammed-to, followed by the click of a key turning in the lock.

The whole affair had been so sudden that he'd hardly had time to realise exactly what had happened nor to ponder all that it implied. But he had begun to wonder who could have so suddenly assaulted him. He was, however, to be saved much worry on this point, if not on many others. For, outside the door, he heard a sneering voice which he recognised all too clearly: "So, Commander Browning, as you would say, the tables revolve. I do wish my friend *Herr* Stetson was here. He would be as pleased as I am to know that you will be quite safe in there—for ever!"

There was such a world of meaning in the last two words that Browning's blood ran cold. And the sweat was chill upon his forehead as he realised the greater truth: not only was he a prisoner, but Tania, his lovely Tania, must, all unknowing, have fallen into the hands of Stetson's dangerous master—the elusive Roderigo Carvellis.

X

IN THE chart-house of the *Westminster* Prentice and Hardcastle studied the chart of the Alexandria, Port Said, and Haifa triangle at the eastern end of the Mediterranean.

"Here," said Hardcastle, placing his finger on the spot, "is Nelson's Island, five miles to seaward of Aboukir, twenty from where we are now. We'll be there in three-quarters of an hour."

"And there," commented Prentice, "it appears that this fellow, Carvellis, is waiting for a submarine to come in some time to-night to take him off."

"Exactly," replied Hardcastle, "according to our orders."

"To think that Browning must have been standing on the beach this afternoon and looked at the place. He'll be furious when he hears about it. He'll be even more annoyed at not being in at the kill, as we're going to be."

"As we *hope* to be," amended Hardcastle. "I prefer not to count my chickens."

"You're right! What else do your orders say?"

"The submarine may be expected to approach the island from a direction between north-east and north-west. Time not known, but between midnight and four in the morning is most likely. We're to take charge of the Twenty-Ninth Division and carry out an A/S¹ search to seaward of the island. And if we should detect anything 'lurking horribly' beneath the surface, we are at liberty to carry out live depth-charge practice until the cows come home. If anything unfortunate *should* occur——"

Prentice interrupted with: "Such as bringing a *strange* Greek submarine forcibly to the surface."

Hardcastle continued: "Or even sinking it, we offer all sorts of apologies, but really they had no right to be in territorial waters."

¹ Anti-Submarine.

Prentice rubbed his hands together as if relishing the idea. "Lovely," he said; "but what about Carvellis while all this is going on?"

"We're to close Nelson's Island first and send a party ashore to capture him."

"Which is where I come in?"

"Precisely," answered Hardcastle. "You go ashore with the landing party to identify the bird. I shall turn over the hunt to the *Wishart* whilst we're away. She's S.O.¹ of the Twenty-Ninth Division."

The voice of the Officer of the Watch speaking down the voicepipe from the bridge announced the expected sighting of the four destroyers of the Twenty-Ninth Division on the eastern horizon. Prentice, knowing full well that Hardcastle would be fully occupied during the next half-hour in the process of taking these vessels under his orders and in communicating to them by signal his instructions for the night's operation, left the chart-house and found his way below to the wardroom, where supper was already being served.

It was half-past eight when he returned to the bridge. It was a comparatively light night. The moon, nearly full, surrounded by a pale corona, was rising in the east, illuminating a wide lane of silver across the sable waters. The sea was practically a flat calm, disturbed only by the occasional flutter of a cat's-paw. The wave on each bow of the *Westminster* curled up, rushed aft, and broke astern into the trailing wake in a cascade of phosphorescence.

Away to port, Prentice could make out the darkened silhouette of the *Wishart*, the nearest consort, standing out against the sombre night blue sky of the northern horizon. He knew that the other three destroyers lay beyond, all five vessels having been ordered by Hardcastle to spread in line abreast two miles apart and to sweep at fifteen knots on an easterly course, along the submarine's probable line of approach.

No noise reached the bridge save the rush of water,

¹ Senior Officer.

the confident hum of the ship's many thousand horsepower turbines, the roar of the boiler-room fans, and an occasional murmur from one of the officers or men on watch.

Presently Hardcastle asked a question: "How's the time, Sub?"

The Officer of the Watch answered: "One minute to the half-hour, sir."

Hardcastle looked at the glowing circumference of the illuminated gyro compass. He said: "Alter to one seven five."

"Aye, aye, sir."

"I told the others I should leave them without further signal," Hardcastle remarked to Prentice. "There's enough light for us to be seen for miles, but I don't want to make things worse by flashing signals all over the place. I don't want to give the game away, either to the submarine or to Carvellis, or any one else who may be on the island."

Prentice realised that this was also the reason why all five destroyers were darkened and steaming without navigation lights.

In response to the Sub-Lieutenant's orders, the *Westminster* heeled over sharply to starboard as she swung round nearly ninety degrees to the new course. The black silhouette of the *Wishart* disappeared into the darkness astern.

Hardcastle spoke again: "Are you there, Number One?"

The First Lieutenant answered from the back of the bridge: "Yes, sir." He added: "The landing party's all ready, sir."

"How many?"

"Six to go ashore, leaving two boat-keepers."

"A signalman?"

"Yes, sir, with box lamp. There's an Aldis in the boat in case it's wanted."

"Good! Who's in charge?"

"I thought you'd want me to go, sir."

"I do; but Prentice will go with you to identify the blighter we're after."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Hardcastle turned to Prentice: "You'd better go down and get yourself ready now, John," he said. "We're nearly there. Number One will have a pistol ready for you."

It was not long before the *Westminster* stopped and lay motionless in the water a little less than a mile from Nelson's Island. The whaler, carrying seven armed seamen and a signalman, together with the First Lieutenant and Prentice, was lowered and slipped from its falls. The former, a lieutenant by name Wisdom, gave the order to give way, and the boat commenced its journey towards the shore.

The conditions—light night with calm sea—could not have been better, and inside twenty minutes the clinker-built hull grated softly to rest on the beach. Immediately the landing party was ashore, they split, at Wisdom's direction, into pairs, and commenced a search of the island. One couple was allocated to the perimeter outside the walls of the fort, one the inside. Wisdom, accompanied by Prentice, took the remaining pair, which included the signalman, with him to the centre of the area inside the fort. This he made his temporary headquarters pending developments.

The search continued for an hour without result. At the end of that time Wisdom, impatience in his voice, remarked: "We don't seem to be having much luck. I'm beginning to wonder whether we haven't come on a wild-goose chase."

"I was just thinking the same thing," said Prentice. "It isn't as if it was really dark. There's practically enough light to see all over the inside of the fort from here."

"I wonder if I ought to signal off to the ship."

"I suggest not just yet," answered Prentice. "Not until you and I have had a good look round the island ourselves."

Wisdom accepted this with alacrity. He was averse to confessing failure until this was no longer avoidable. With the pre-arranged signal of a single short blast on a whistle he called in his men, and instructed them to stand easy in a group in the centre of the island. Warning them on no account to smoke or talk other than in whispers, he left them in the charge of a young petty officer and set off with Prentice to tour the island. In due course the officers came to the two ruined buildings in the northern corner of the surrounding walls.

"I wonder if the troops looked inside these," whispered Wisdom.

"No idea," answered Prentice, "but we'd certainly better do so."

They turned together into one of the roofless dwellings. Inside they paused and looked round. Wisdom's eyes alighted on something in the far corner. He could not identify it in the dim light. He walked forward and picked it up.

Prentice asked: "Have you found something?"

Wisdom held it up. "Odd," he remarked; "it appears to be a female's bathing-dress."

"A what?" commented the surprised Prentice. "By Jove, you're right! And here," he continued, bending down, "are a pair of gent's natty bathing-shorts."

"Presumably," remarked Wisdom, "someone's been here for a bathe recently with his girl friend and left their gear behind. Hardly a clue to Carvellis's whereabouts."

As if emphasising his lack of interest in the discovery he idly dropped the garment.

But Prentice had a different idea. "Hold on a minute," he said; "let's see if the things are marked. Switch on your torch for a moment."

He was already holding out the white name-tape sewn inside the back of the shorts. Wisdom directed a dimmed beam of light upon it.

"P. Browning," read Prentice. He scratched his head; then continued speaking to himself rather than to Wisdom. "I suppose the other belongs to Tania. What

an odd coincidence they should come *here* this afternoon."

After which his mind began to ponder why they should have left their bathing gear lying thus on the island. There was a note of urgency in his voice when he spoke again. "Listen, Wisdom," he said; "for some reason Miss Maitland and Commander Browning came here this afternoon. Probably just a chance visit. Something must have happened to make them drop their bathing gear and leave it lying here. It may mean they're still on the island. We must make sure."

He wasted no time in suiting action to words by commencing a very thorough search of every inch of the ruined building. And it was in so doing that he found in one corner, where the shadows of the near walls hid them from a mere casual glance, the flight of steps leading down into the ground.

"Wisdom," he called excitedly, "come over here! Give me your torch, man. I'm going down. Follow close behind. It looks as if this is where the fun begins."

When, during the afternoon, Tania Maitland had first discovered the flight of steps, she had walked down them, prompted by mere curiosity. Her natural self-confidence—one reason for her success as an actress—overruled any fears of the darkness which greeted her at the bottom. Imagining, though without reason, that Browning would be following closely behind, she felt her way along the underground passage until after some thirty paces it turned to the right. To her astonishment, she saw a few yards ahead a door which was open just enough to show that there was a light beyond. With what afterwards she admitted was regrettable lack of discretion—but, then, after all why should she expect anything alarming—she pushed the door open and walked through. Standing facing her was a little ferret of a man with bloodshot eyes, whom, to the best of her knowledge, she had never seen before.

"Oh," she gasped, then stammered, perhaps rather foolishly, "who are you? What are you doing here?"

Roderigo Carvellis ignored her questions, and sneered: "So! The spider walks into the fly's parlour."

The point of this muddled metaphor was beyond her, the fact that the stranger foreboded evil was not. He was looking at her too intently for comfort. There was an ugly glint in his eyes as he appraised her from head to toe.

She repeated her inquiry: "Who are you? What are you doing here?" for want of anything better to say rather than from any wish to know the answer or from any conviction that the stranger was likely to tell her.

There was something ominous in the silence which followed. The man who faced her, whose eyes now held her with a fixed, forbidding stare, might be small of stature, slovenly of dress, repulsive of appearance, yet she could not resist the strength of the strange hypnotic influence of his personality. A chill ran down her spine. Quite suddenly she knew she was afraid.

From outside there echoed Browning's voice: "Tania!"

Roderigo Carvellis did not wait to see whether she would answer. He darted across the room, clapped one hand over her mouth. Holding it there, he spun her round until he had pinioned her neck in the crook of his arm. Then from his pocket he drew a handkerchief, forced it into her mouth as a gag, and knotted it behind her head. Surprised by the swiftness of his attack, she made little attempt to resist him. And by his next action she was denied the chance. With a thin piece of cord he tied her wrists together behind her back. Only then did he release his hold upon her. Pushing her roughly from him towards the inner wall, he turned on his heel and walked out of the room. And as soon as he had closed the door behind him she heard the key turn in the lock.

Her alarm had to some extent been allayed by Browning's shout. She reckoned that he must soon find her and come to her aid. Her anxiety of mind thus relieved, she tried to release her wrists, but the cords only

bit painfully into her flesh. She attempted a shout, but the gag reduced her vocal efforts to a strangled gasp.

She ceased struggling, however, only when she heard the key turning again in the lock. The door opened and the stranger re-entered the room. He said: "I imagine that I have the honour"—there was scorn in his voice as he said this—"of addressing Miss Tania Maitland."

Though she gave no sign of assent to this statement, he appeared to consider that he had made a correct assumption, and went on smoothly: "I regret the slight delay in introducing myself." He drew his heels together, bowed slightly, and announced portentously: "General Roderigo Carvellis."

So this was the dangerous individual who led the E.P.I.R.E.S., the man of no country but an international reputation for evil, who had chosen to pit his wits against the forces of law and order in the Middle East. She had every justification now for being frightened, yet, paradoxically, because she was no longer faced with the unknown she was no longer afraid; at least for herself. But what of Peter?

Carvellis suddenly pushed a chair across the room towards Tania with his foot. "Sit down," he commanded, then continued less abruptly, "since we have some time to wait. I want to talk to you. It would be as well for your future health, Miss Maitland, if you were to understand—fully—the result of your visit to this island this afternoon. We shall not be disturbed——"

She caught her breath as he said this, particularly since an ugly vicious tone had suddenly crept into his voice.

"We shall not be disturbed, because your interfering friend, Commander Browning, is where he can meddle with my affairs no more."

Awful fears came into her mind now. Was it possible that this odious crook, to whom no human life, save his own, was of value, could, in that brief period he had been absent from the underground room, have surprised her Peter—and murdered him? The very possibility—and it seemed much more than that—was an agony to her,

since Peter was the man whom she now knew she loved with all her heart. The agony was doubled when she knew that it was all her fault, since she had suggested the visit to the island; more than that, she had discovered Carvellis's secret hiding-place, had wandered blindly into it, had led her beloved Peter all unsuspecting to the one man who had good reason to wish him out of the way.

Perhaps Carvellis sensed something of what was going on in her mind, for he continued: "He is not dead—yet. Only locked in another room such as this. But when I leave this island very shortly I intend he shall remain there; and since there is no chance of any one finding him, he will undoubtedly die in due course of hunger and thirst. Which will be very unpleasant for him, but he should not have interfered with my work."

The flat, matter-of-fact tone of his last remarks struck a new terror in her heart, even though she clung desperately to two straws of hope: Peter was as yet alive and unharmed; and there was the possibility, remote though it might be, that just as they had that afternoon crossed to the island by chance, so on another day might someone else. But that day would have to be *very* soon. Then she forced herself to listen to Carvellis, who was still speaking to her.

"So, Miss Maitland, we will forget about Commander Browning. And we will consider your future." He paused, as if struck by a sudden thought, and continued: "But I am forgetting. You know my name, but not who I am."

Revolting against the idea of having to listen to an autobiographical dissertation, Tania nodded her head vigorously.

For a brief moment Carvellis allowed a self-satisfied smile to cross his face. "Oh," he said, "so you do know! I suppose your friend, Commander Browning, told you." His smile changed to a frown. "I wonder just how much he knew. You shall tell me some time. For now I must consider what to do with you."

Carvellis drew up a chair and sat down, placing his

feet aggressively upon the table which lay between him and Tania. From his breast pocket he extracted a cigar, stuck the end between his yellow stained teeth, bit off and spat out the end. Then he placed it in the corner of his mouth between his thick lips, struck a match and lit it. To Tania there was blatant vulgarity in every gesture with which he accomplished all this. But however repulsive he might seem, she found herself unable to take her eyes off him. With her hands bound behind her, she was virtually helpless. Gagged, she was forced to be silent. She could only wait, wondering what he was going to do or say next. And that period of waiting seemed unbearably long. For an age Carvellis sat almost motionless, lost in thought, the blue smoke rising lazily into the air from his cigar, his eyes for the most part gazing at the ceiling, but every now and then dropping to stare at her from beneath lowered lids.

But at last Carvellis made up his mind. "In half an hour from now," he said, "I am expecting a submarine which will take me back to Crete. I cannot release you; you know too much. Besides, why should I be so magnanimous? I could leave you here—not, of course, with your lover. I see no reason why Commander Browning should be afforded that pleasure even in what is destined to be his death-cell. I could leave you in this room to suffer the same slow death. In a way that would be what you English call poetic justice. In addition to the physical agonies of hunger and thirst, your lover would undergo mental torture from knowing that you, too, were suffering in the same way within a few yards of him. And he would be powerless to help. A pleasant thought! You see, Miss Maitland, it has always been extremely unfortunate for any one who has been so stupid as to interfere with my activities."

Carvellis paused to transfer the butt of his cigar to the opposite corner of his mouth. When he spoke again it was with an air of gratuitous condescension.

"But you need not be alarmed," he said. "I have decided otherwise. I never had much use for women.

But I can see that you're an attractive one, and you've unusual talents and ability. You *could* be most useful to me. Whether you *will* be depends on how sensible you are; but I haven't time to pursue that now. Besides, even if you aren't, I'm quite sure our mutual friend *Herr* Stetson will appreciate you. He's got ideas where you are concerned, as you probably know, Miss Maitland, and in Crete you wouldn't be able to treat him as foolishly as you've been doing here."

Carvellis laid heavy emphasis on his final words: "Yes, Miss Maitland; I've decided to take you with me back to Crete. What happens there is up to you."

By the time he had finished speaking, Tania's thoughts were in a turmoil. She experienced little relief at hearing that she was to suffer no immediate harm. She was afraid of the calculating evil which lay behind the odious mask of the man who faced her. She was in an agony of apprehension for her beloved Peter, whom she might never, it seemed, see again. And all the time she was trying desperately to think of some means whereby she might escape, to conceive some possibility of rescue from the clutches of the dangerous man who held her in his power.

Carvellis looked at his watch. "Seven o'clock," he said, rising from his chair. "It is time we were moving. You will come with me."

He grasped one of her arms in a vice-like grip and urged her in front of him out of the room and along the passage towards the steps. Half-way he paused, and gave a sharp knock on a door in the wall on one side.

"Commander Browning," he called, "I am leaving the island in a few minutes now. We shall not meet again *in this world*. Consider yourself fortunate that the death which awaits you is no worse. Others who have been so stupid as to interfere with my activities have suffered much more. You need not worry about Miss Maitland; I am taking her with me. I expect her to be of service to me; but should she refuse, I do not doubt *Herr*

Stetson will appreciate her company when he next visits Crete."

At Carvellis's first words Browning had remained silent, but, on hearing the last sentence, his pent-up rage burst forth in torrents. He beat upon the door with his fists, crying: "You filthy swine! You dirty rat! If you so much as touch Miss Maitland with your loathsome hands, I'll tear your very guts out. Take me with you and do what you like with me, but leave her alone and let her go."

He went on for perhaps five minutes in similar vein before he realised, from the silence, that Carvellis had gone.

With Browning's anguished words ringing in her ears and tearing at her heart, Tania had been propelled roughly up the steps. She was by now so much in a mental daze that she hardly realised what was happening to her. The will to resist had gone, and she was only half-conscious that she was being taken across the island in the semi-darkness which follows sunset to the northern shore of the island. She did not see the black hull of the submarine come to the surface off the island, nor the small boat which was launched from it until it grated on the shingle close at hand. She offered no resistance as Carvellis pushed her into the stern-sheets.

Before the skiff reached the submarine he cut the cords which bound her hands. In accordance with his directions, she was thus able to climb up into the conning-tower and thence down the ladder into the control-room, where the intricate maze of pipes, electric cables, valves, gauges, and other instruments only increased her bewilderment. Her state of mind was such that she hardly heard the hooters which suddenly screeched throughout the boat, or the excited orders and the apparent turmoil which followed.

But up in the conning-tower, just as the skiff was being replaced in its housing in the submarine's casing, the cause of the alarm had been real enough. Both the Captain and Roderigo Carvellis had seen, all too clearly

silhouetted against the last light in the western sky, the dark shapes of five British destroyers.

Prentice, closely followed by Wisdom, reached the bottom of the steps, and shone the torch into the darkness ahead of him.

"An underground passage," he commented. "We'll explore farther. But look out for snags and keep your revolver handy." He had already drawn his own.

The two officers walked slowly along the passage. After ten paces they came to two doors, one on each side. That on the left was closed and locked. The other was open, but a quick search inside showed nothing except a small room which was entirely bare. They went on twenty paces to where the passage turned sharply to the right. Around the corner they were confronted with another door, which was also locked.

"Well, that's that," commented Wisdom.

"On the face of it, yes," replied Prentice; "but we can't leave things at that. Why, man, look at this door! It's quite new. The others are the same. This place has been used recently. And, whoever it was, must have been up to no good. What else could any one want to come down here for?"

"Very well," said Wisdom, "we'd better break these doors in. I'll go back and fetch a couple of hands to help us."

Without waiting for Prentice's concurrence, he turned and walked back to the steps. Left thus alone for the moment, Prentice lit a much-needed cigarette, and by force of habit began pacing slowly up and down the underground passage. And he began to whistle the theme of Tania's song, "Home, Dearie, Home." He was cut short after a dozen bars by a sudden outburst of hammering on the inside of the locked door nearest the steps.

From within he heard a voice shout: "Hallo there! I want help! I'm locked in! Can you get me out?"

By the second sentence Prentice had recognised the

voice. "Peter!" he cried excitedly. "It's John here! What on earth are you doing in there?"

"John, by all that's wonderful! Thank God you've come! Have you found Carvellis?"

"No; is he here?"

"Of course he is—or, rather, was. You don't suppose I'm in here for fun, do you? He locked me in. But never mind that now. The important thing is that *he's got Tania.*"

"But he can't have, Peter. We've been searching the island for more than an hour and seen no one."

"I tell you," answered Browning impatiently, "he's got Tania. He told me so, damn him! But," he continued, raising his voice, "don't stand outside arguing, man! For heaven's sake get the door open! There's not a moment to be lost!"

The sound of footsteps and voices announced the return of Wisdom, accompanied by two seamen. A word of explanation from Prentice, an order from Wisdom, and the combined weight of their brawny shoulders made short work of the door.

Browning, thus released, was greeted warmly by his friend, who rapidly explained the presence of their party on the island. Browning, in his turn, briefly recounted his afternoon's adventures.

At the end Prentice commented grimly: "My God, what a swine! I am sorry for Tania."

"Not half as sorry as I am," replied Browning, "particularly since I got her into this mess. We simply must find her, and be damn' quick about it."

"I agree; but where?"

Whilst they were talking, Wisdom and his men had opened the second door. He now returned to report: "The other room's obviously been used quite recently. There's furniture and food in it. But there's no one there now."

"Damn!" exploded Browning. "That fixes it. Carvellis must have left the island before you chaps

arrived, since you've seen no sign of him. And taken Tania with him."

"We were led to believe the submarine wouldn't come here until later," remarked Wisdom. "Not that that matters. We couldn't have arrived any earlier."

Prentice had been making a mental calculation. "Carvellis may have embarked up to an hour ago," he said. "Presumably the submarine would travel submerged near the coast on a night as light as this, so she'd not be more than five miles or so away." An idea suddenly struck him. "My God, Peter," he went on, "that means she'll be just about where the Twenty-Ninth Division are searching! They may detect her at any moment."

"I don't understand," said Browning. "What does it matter if they do?"

"Matter, Peter? They've orders to carry out depth-charge practice if they detect anything, and to hunt until they kill. *And Tania is on board.*"

The ghastly fact that it would be some time before they could be on board the *Westminster* and in a position to communicate by wireless with the other destroyers and thus call off the hunt—or at least amend the orders about the use of depth-charges—struck all three officers simultaneously. But before they could voice their thoughts, all three heard in the distance the deep reverberating sound of a heavy explosion.

Grimly Prentice exclaimed: "A depth-charge! My God, they've found the brute!"

Browning snapped an order: "Quick, Wisdom," he said; "call your men together. We must get off to the ship as fast as we can."

Prentice placed a hand on his friend's shoulder and asked a question: "What for, Peter?"

"What a damn-fool question, John," was Browning's terse reply. "To tell Hardcastle to stop the hunt at once, of course."

"My question wasn't really stupid, Peter. I know it's damned hard for you, but do you think you really ought

to give Hardcastle such orders? You're his senior, of course, and he'd probably not want to ignore you. But he's working under F.O.L.E.M.'s orders—to destroy the submarine because Carvellis is aboard. And he's too dangerous to be allowed to escape. He's a menace to the peace of the whole Middle East."

In the darkness Prentice felt his friend grow tense. And there was a moment's tense silence when he was in doubt as to what his reaction would be. But Browning was a man of steel.

"You're right, John," he said. "I was letting my personal feelings sway my judgment. I have no right to interfere with Hardcastle's orders. He must get Carvellis. You're not even to tell him Tania's aboard. It would put him off his stroke. See that Wisdom doesn't tell him either until it's over. There's always a possibility," he added, "that the submarine may be depth-charged to the surface and forced to surrender. In which case there would be a chance to rescue her."

Half an hour later the *Westminster* was racing at thirty knots in the direction whence the periodical explosion of depth-charges could still be heard. On the port side of the bridge stood Browning and Prentice, each staring into the night, each breathing a silent prayer to Providence that Tania might that night be snatched from the grave from which it seemed she could now only be saved by a miracle.

XI

ROGER STETSON was by no means the only one-time Nazi employed by Roderigo Carvellis. The captain of the rebel Greek submarine was also a close-cropped, square-headed German. It was not so many years since he had commanded a U-boat and preyed upon British shipping in the Atlantic. He owed his life to the good fortune which had attended him on his second war patrol. His boat had been surprised on the surface one night by a Leigh Light Sunderland. The aircraft's depth-charge attack had been as accurate as it was sudden. The submarine had almost immediately gone to the bottom, leaving her captain and two members of the crew to swim for it. A patrolling British corvette had rescued them, and they had spent the remaining two and a half years of the war in the security of a prisoner-of-war camp in the Midlands.

This officer's experience of British sea power had left him no illusion as to its potency. He knew that for dogged persistence in pursuing their quarry to the death, there were none to equal either warships of the Royal Navy or the planes of Coastal Command. He might no longer be commanding a submarine belonging to a nation at war with Britain, but he had little doubt that the presence of British destroyers on this occasion would not be healthy for any submarine, least of all one belonging to a rebel Greek faction, engaged in indubitably illegal activities. Wherefore his immediate reaction on sighting the approaching Twenty-Ninth Division had been to crash-dive.

Having taken his craft well out of sight below the surface, he returned to periscope depth. Standing in the centre of the brilliantly lit control-room, he gave the order: "Up periscope." Moved with only a slight hiss by hydraulic power, the instrument rose from its well in

the deck. The German officer crouched almost to his knees to seize the handles and put his eye to the instrument. It rose slowly until the upper window was above the surface. Then he swung it round until the five British vessels came into his view.

Around him were the several members of his crew, standing at their stations in grim, almost sullen, silence. They were a motley collection of individuals; ruffians in appearance without exception, for the most part Cretan Greeks, who blindly believed in the E.P.I.R.E.S. cause, but there were a few who, like their Captain, for one unsavoury reason or another, were exiles from other countries.

By the Captain's side stood Carvellis, betraying his anxiety by the occasional movement of the tip of his tongue over his thick lips, by the spasmodic clenching and unclenching of his fists, by the way he shifted his weight first from one foot and then to the other.

And against the forward bulkhead, rigid, motionless, forgotten for a moment, latent fear in her eyes, stood Tania.

The Captain barked an order: "Down periscope."

Then he turned to Carvellis: "Four ships are steaming east. The fifth is coming this way."

"What do you intend to do?"

"We cannot escape detection by their asdics if we go to seaward. It is too shallow to go deep."

"What do you intend to do?" repeated Carvellis grimly.

The Captain was thinking only of the deadly sting of a destroyer's depth-charges. Anything was worth risking to avoid such an attack. He walked over to the chart which was lying on the table, and studied it carefully. In a moment he made up his mind.

He said: "There should be just enough water for us in the bay. I am going inside the island. If we lie close to it on the bottom we shall be screened from their asdics. We must risk the chance of running aground."

He did not wait for Carvellis's approval before ordering

the submarine's electric motors to be put to slow speed ahead.

On the starboard side of the bridge of the *Westminster*, Lieutenant-Commander Hardcastle sat in a high, straight-backed wooden chair staring ahead through binoculars. Browning and Prentice stood close beside him. Above the steady rush of the wind and sea, which the destroyer created as she raced through the water, the radio loud-speaker on the bridge was clearly audible. The constant crackling of atmospherics issuing from it was punctuated by the orders and reports which the *Wishart*, *Wren*, *Walpole*, and *Wey* were interchanging by R/T.¹ For the listeners in the *Westminster* they provided an effective commentary on the manoeuvres of the four destroyers as again and again they swept across the target which their asdics had located, and each time dropped a pattern of depth-charges.

"Target's stationary," commented Hardcastle. "That looks promising."

Down the voicepipe to the wheelhouse he ordered: "Slow both engines."

To Browning he remarked: "We shall be up with them in a couple of minutes. I don't want to disturb the scent."

The *Westminster* suddenly shuddered violently five times in succession, causing the three officers involuntarily to grasp hold of the bridge rail. There followed the dull roar of exploding depth-charges.

"They've given her another pattern," said Hardcastle. "I'm going to take over from *Wishart* now," he continued. "Give me the microphone, Yeoman."

He was about to speak over the R/T to the *Wishart* when a strident voice issued from the loudspeaker. "This is *Wren*. Contact believed to be non-sub."

Before the *Wishart*, as temporary senior officer could acknowledge this report, the voice of the R/T operator in the *Wey* chimed in: "Confirm contact non-sub."

¹ Radio Telephone.

"Blast!" remarked Hardcastle with justifiable feeling. "A false alarm. I suppose they've been wasting their time depth charging a wreck—or a shoal of porpoises."

His mind went back to the long days and nights he had spent as first lieutenant of a frigate escorting convoys across the Atlantic during the war. And he remembered the many false alarms they had experienced then. It was not always easy with asdics to differentiate between wrecks, shoals of fish, and the targets they were really after—U-boats. Many depth-charges had been needlessly expended before such false scents had been exposed.

Browning's immediate feeling—and, to a lesser extent, Prentice's—was one of relief, but it soon gave place to a realisation that though Tania might for the moment be safe, the search for the submarine must still go on. Hardcastle was already busy taking the Twenty-Ninth Division under his orders, directing them to spread out again in line abreast and resume their anti-submarine sweep.

But he found time to comment: "Looks as if this may be an all-night job. Why don't you two go down to the wardroom, have a drink, and get your heads down. I'll let you know if anything happens."

"Thanks," answered Browning. "I'm not so sure about getting my head down, but I could do with a drink. Come on, John."

Prentice turned to follow his friend down the ladder leading below. He would have liked to reply to Browning's suggestion with words of comfort, but the only comment which came into his mind was, in all the circumstances, a ludicrous one about drowning one's sorrows. And he deemed that best unsaid.

Tania, in the control-room of the submarine, had not dared to remove the gag from her mouth, although her hands were free. The combination of shock and fear had numbed her senses, had deprived her of the will to move. And her mind was in a turmoil.

At one moment her uppermost thought was that she, a woman—and a physically attractive one at that—was alone and at the mercy of a score or more of criminals and ruffians, whose evil appearance left no doubt in her mind of what her fate would be if Carvellis allowed them to have their way. She was distracted by the mere thought that she was in a submarine fathoms deep below the surface, a fear which may come to any one experiencing this for the first time. Worse still, the submarine was in danger. Though she could not understand one word of what was being said by the men around her—she assumed they were speaking in Greek—nor therefore begin to comprehend what was going on, she somehow sensed the feeling of apprehension which filled the minds of the crew.

There could be only one explanation for the distant explosions which every now and again shook the submarine so violently. British warships, which she knew from Peter had been patrolling the coast for the last twenty-four hours in the hopes of locating the rebel vessel, must be attacking it. They could not know that she was on board.

But presently the attacks ceased, and, relieved of her fears on that score, her mind turned to thoughts of Peter, *her* Peter, who had been left to die a lingering death, whom she would never see again. Peter! Dear God, how she loved him! She knew *that* now beyond all doubt. And from the last agonised words which he had uttered from his prison, she knew that he loved her. Please, God, for just a moment in which she might see him again, in which to tell him of her love, in which to hear from his lips that he loved her.

From those last thoughts grew an idea. There must be—more than that, there *was*—a chance that Peter would somehow be rescued. In which case, if she was to see him again, she had somehow to escape from her present predicament, ugly though it might appear to be. How she would achieve this she had at the moment no idea, but she reckoned that sooner or later, if she kept her wits about her, she would find an opportunity to make use of

that most potent weapon which is a woman's birthright: her physical attraction. In which respect she was indeed well armed, not only by nature, but by her histrionic gifts and experience. Carvellis might profess to have no use for women—whether that was true remained to be seen—but there were always his lieutenants. And by guile there was surely no limit to the concessions she might gain from one of them, and, perhaps, thereby obtain her freedom.

Her thoughts were interrupted by Carvellis. Satisfied for the moment with the submarine's movements, he crossed the control-room to her side and removed the gag from her mouth. With a curt phrase he directed her through the watertight door in the bulkhead into the next compartment, and from there into a tiny cabin on the starboard side of the boat.

"You will sleep here," he said without expression as he closed the door and then locked it.

She was not surprised by the abrupt tone of his voice. But, had she known him better, she would have realised the reason: that he was afraid. He had been in a position to know the fate which had befallen so many U-boats during the war. He knew that, unless the British destroyers gave up the hunt, his chances of returning safely to Crete were slender. For all his cunning he was, at heart, when the safety of his own skin was involved, a coward.

But his fears proved groundless. Throughout the night the submarine lay safely on the bottom inside the island, and there was no indication that they had been discovered. The day which followed was equally quiet. At sunset the German Captain brought the craft up to periscope depth and steered slowly round the island to seaward. A quick glance around the horizon, followed by a more thorough search through the periscope, revealed no ship in sight. With an audible sigh of relief he ordered course to be set for the Kaso Strait between the eastern end of Crete and the island of Scarpanto.

Tania was left almost entirely alone throughout the

voyage. She slept much of the time, helped by the effects of the stuffy atmosphere of the interior of the submarine. Periodically she was disturbed by a dirty, ill-kempt member of the crew bringing a bowl of thick greasy soup and a hunk of coarse brown bread or something equally unappetising. Once only did she see Carvellis, and then it was not for long.

He came into her cabin on the second evening. There was barely room for two in the tiny compartment, and she had to submit to the indignity of lying on the bunk whilst he stood almost over her. He was unshaven. The several days' old beard upon his jaw served to heighten the dark sinister appearance of his features. He was repulsive to look upon. Yet once again she found herself unable to turn her eyes away from him. She was seemingly hypnotised by his extraordinary personality, by the hidden power which smouldered behind his piercing bloodshot eyes.

Cold hostility in her voice, she asked: "What do you want?"

Speaking quite slowly he answered: "We are due at Suda Bay, where I have my headquarters, to-morrow morning. I should prefer to know before we arrive whether you intend to be sensible then, Miss Maitland."

"You mean——" she began.

But he ignored her question, continued: "As I told you two days ago, I have no interest in women . . . except for what they can do *for me*. You, with your unusual talents and ability, can do much. There is always work which an attractive woman can do better than a man."

Seeing a look of bewilderment in her face, Carvellis continued brusquely: "Surely I need not be more explicit!"

There was an appreciable interval before Tania asked quietly: "And the alternative?"

Roderigo Carvellis's features creased into an ugly leer as he slowly withdrew. "Shall I just say," he answered, "*Herr Stetson*. . . ."

XII

THOUGH THE German Captain of the rebel Greek submarine might claim credit for the way in which he eluded the hunting British destroyers by lying doggo in the shallow water on the inshore side of Nelson's Island, his escape was in no small measure due to good fortune.

On the afternoon of the day after the *Westminster's* landing party had failed to find Carvellis on the island, the destroyer received by wireless from a patrolling Walrus 'plane a report that a submerged submarine had been sighted some fifty miles to the north of the island. Hardcastle justifiably decided that this might well be his quarry, and at once ordered his force to the position at high speed.

Somewhat to his surprise he received no further reports from the aircraft, but after two hours this was explained by a signal from F.O.L.E.M. informing him that it was believed to have made a forced landing. The five destroyers consequently spent the night searching for the lost aircraft in addition to the submarine. Only when the latter was located, waterlogged and in danger of sinking, shortly after dawn the next morning, did Hardcastle learn that the reported sighting had been false. Some trick reflection of the light upon the placid green surface of the water had caused the observer to believe that he had seen a submarine below him. He discovered his mistake too late to cancel the wireless report, since at the critical moment the 'plane's single engine failed and the forced landing which followed rendered its wireless transmitter unserviceable.

Admiral Pulgrave, on receiving a signal from the *Westminster* reporting these events, decided that the scent was by that time too cold to make a continuation of the hunt justifiable, and ordered the destroyers to return to harbour.

The Admiral was in Cairo for a conference with the G.O.C.-in-C. when Browning and Prentice returned in chastened mood late in the evening. They were not therefore able to report to him personally until the next day, when, after the morning staff meeting, he summoned them both to his office, together with his Chief of Staff.

Slumped down in his chair, an expression on his face which only showed animation when a fly came within range of his ever-roving swatter, he listened in silence to the two officers' stories. When they had finished, he looked up with a wry smile and remarked: "We seem to be out of luck at the moment. Carvellis has well and truly seen us off. He's escaped our clutches twice, and, to add to the headache he's given us by the theft of the treaty, he's carried off this woman. We're going to find it damned hard to keep that out of the press. Damn it, I can see the headlines already: 'Famous English actress kidnapped by Greek brigand,' or some such exaggerated nonsense."

Browning was unable to refrain from an interruption. "Hardly nonsense, sir," he said. "She's the leading lady of *Black and White*."

The Admiral looked at him sharply. "Exaggerated nonsense, I said, Browning. But this is not the time to discuss the relative merits of actresses even if she is a friend of yours. I appreciate that she only became involved in this affair by accident, but that doesn't alter the fact that she's made things much more difficult for us."

Nettled by the reproof, Browning lapsed into silence. Admiral Pulgrave continued: "Such publicity will lead to the whole story, stolen treaty and all, coming out, which we simply cannot afford."

The Chief of Staff commented: "There's still no news of the treaty. I should have expected repercussions from some troublesome quarter by this time, sir."

"About the only bit of *good* luck we seem to have had so far in the business, Kelly," answered the Admiral grimly. "I wish to God we could lay our hands on it;

we might breathe again then. However, we're in the hands of the security police as far as that's concerned. And we can count on nothing."

Prentice remarked: "We oughtn't to lose sight of the fact that Carvellis appeared particularly interested in the passage of the *Colossus* through the Canal, sir."

"When someone explains to me, Prentice, why he displayed such interest in the *Colossus*, and why it matters to us, I'll sit up and take notice," retorted the Admiral. "Hang it all, you're not suggesting that Carvellis can sabotage the ship, are you?"

In the face of this outburst Prentice was silent. But he was grateful for the Chief of Staff's next remark: "Sabotage, sir? It's an idea," said Captain Kelly, "though not a very likely one. There'd be no harm in warning 'em to keep an extra look-out for anything suspicious."

"Humph," grunted the Admiral, "I've no objection! I'll have a word with Bellamy when I go aboard to lunch to-day. But I'm hoping for more concrete action to deal with Carvellis than that." The Admiral paused for a moment to give the *coup de grâce* to a half-mangled fly upon which he had just dealt an inept blow. "I discussed this matter with General Attwater yesterday, and he was in full agreement that whatever happens about the treaty—or the *Colossus*, for that matter—we must find Carvellis. He's too dangerous to be at large. If he doesn't cause an international crisis this time, he'll do so sooner or later. And we must stop this nonsense in Crete without having to use our troops. We've had that tip straight from the horse's mouth, by which I mean the Cabinet. I gather the Greek Ambassador in London has already let it be known that his government is likely to ask for our assistance in dealing with the E.P.I.R.E.S. But we don't want to get embroiled if we can avoid it. Such operations, however altruistic, always result in Great Britain being blamed for everything. So Force 292 have been told to go after him again. We shall provide the necessary craft for them as usual."

Prentice, with rash impetuosity, interjected: "They could rescue Miss Maitland."

The Admiral frowned, and brought his fly-swat down with a crash on the desk. "I have already expressed my views on the subject of this woman, Prentice. Browning, you will, of course, contact Force 292 and arrange details. You'd better go up to Cairo and see them this evening. Offer 'em any help we can give."

Browning answered, "Aye, aye, sir," and the assembled officers, sensing that the interview was over, turned to go.

But in the doorway Browning hesitated and turned back. "Does this help," he asked, "extend to me taking part in the operation myself, sir?"

Admiral Pulgrave looked steadily at his staff officer for a moment. "You're thinking," he said, "that you might be able to rescue Miss Maitland?"

"I was, sir."

"The official answer to your question, Browning, is No, but"—and here the Admiral smiled—"you might perhaps take your cue from the fact that she was captured on Nelson's Island."

Browning's expression showed clearly that he did not understand Admiral Pulgrave's remark.

"Come, come, Browning, you're very dense this morning," he barked. "Nelson! Copenhagen! Blind eye!"

In his sudden appreciation of the licence which the Admiral was offering him, Browning was profuse in his thanks. In truth it was more than he could have hoped for. It changed his whole outlook upon the future. The depression which had lain heavily upon him ever since Tania's disappearance was suddenly lifted. For he was presented with a concrete chance of rescuing her.

But Admiral Pulgrave was paying no attention to him. A momentary display of warm humanity was the only concession his normally austere character was prepared to make. He feared to be demonstrative as much as he disliked any display of personal feelings by others. The

long years of self-discipline necessary for any man who would lead and command others had built up round his heart a wall of steel which was not easily torn down. Pen in hand, he was already deep in a study of a bulky document which he had extracted from his "IN" basket. And, realising that the interview was at an end, Browning quietly left the room.

Lunch at 16 Spinney Villas that day was a hurried affair. It was after half-past twelve when Browning heard that an R.A.F. machine would be able to fly him up to Cairo, departing from Maryut for Heliopolis at two. That meant leaving the house for the airport at half-past one, which left little time for getting back to the house from the office, packing a suitcase for the night, and having lunch.

Browning was not the only one affected. Prentice had decided to seize the opportunity afforded by Browning's 'plane to pay one of his periodical visits to Cairo. There was at least one matter within the sphere of his duties as principal Naval Signal Officer in the Middle East which merited personal discussion with his opposite numbers in the other Services.

A few minutes before half-past one, when the car which was to drive them out to Maryut was already waiting at the door, Joan Gill burst into the dining-room and exclaimed cheerily: "I say What's the hurry? Give a girl a chance. It isn't time for lunch yet."

Prentice retorted: "Sorry, Joan, dear, but we're off to Cairo by air. Got to fly."

"In more senses than one, apparently," she answered. "Don't say you're off on the toot. No, don't answer. I know what you're going to say: that, as world's workers you've some fearfully important conference to attend. I might believe that of Peter, but, of John, never."

"Your cousin seems to have you sized up all right, John," grinned Browning.

Prentice retorted by pointedly drawing attention to the time, and the two officers rose to leave.

Joan had two afterthoughts. To Prentice she said: "As you are going to Cairo, John dear, I'll remind you that it's my birthday on Monday. And I should like a bottle of really nice perfume from the Muski."

Her cousin was heard to mutter something about the nerve of the impertinent young wench, which could be considered justified in the light of Joan's previous remarks, and left one in doubt whether he intended to meet her wishes.

To Browning she said quietly: "Forgive my irresponsible chatter, Peter. It's not really in bad taste. I know you're fearfully worried about Tania. I just don't want you to get too gloomy about her. Besides, I'm sure she'll turn up again quite soon."

Browning squeezed her hand. "Thanks, Joan," he said. "I am worried. But I'm not letting it get me down. Besides, she's the reason I'm going to Cairo, and if I don't have her back here safely within a week it'll be my own damn fault."

An hour's flight in a Proctor 'plane belonging to the local R.A.F. Communications Flight carried Browning and Prentice from Alexandria across the arid, sun-baked desert and the green plain of the Delta, with its network of irrigation canals, to Heliopolis, one of the big airports on the eastern outskirts of Cairo. A twenty minutes' drive into the city brought them to G.H.Q. Middle East, a building of gargantuan proportions which had once been a block of luxury flats. Leaving Prentice to proceed elsewhere in pursuit of his own devices, Browning climbed to the sixth floor, and thus arrived at the offices which housed the staff of Force 292. In one he located Gerald Chester and his subordinate, Michael Loxby. The latter's ankle had practically recovered from his recent accident on board M.L.683.

For some time the three officers debated various ways and means of recapturing Roderigo Carvellis.

"We can't hope to repeat our last little Crete party," remarked Chester. "Once bitten, twice shy. Either

Carvellis will have changed his motoring habits or he'll be escorted by a gang of thugs too large for us to tackle."

"To try and collar him a second time by holding up his car would be tempting the fates too much," commented Browning with a smile.

Michael Loxby's contribution to the discussion settled the point. "We should hardly find the girl that way," he said.

Chester continued: "I'm all in favour of staging a raid on Carvellis's house one night in the near future. It'll mean a bigger party than last time—a dozen men at least. But it's justified in the circumstances. Anything within reason to make certain we catch our quarry. "I know," he continued dryly, "that we did that last time; but the twofold facts that he subsequently slipped through our fingers and made a damn nuisance of himself in Egypt are more than adequate reasons for ensuring—as far as is humanly possible—that there's no slip in the drill on this occasion."

Loxby, whilst filling his aged briar from a much-soiled pouch of yellow oil silk, commented: "We can make four patrols ready for ops in twenty-four hours." For Browning's benefit he added: "Two dozen men in all, sir, apart from officers."

"You'll want four M.L.s to carry that lot," said Browning. "I couldn't make so many ready at short notice."

Chester twirled the ends of his moustache between the thumb and forefinger of his left hand. "What about a submarine?" he asked.

"A submarine!" answered Browning, without concealing that the question had surprised him: "What's the idea?"

Chester, ignoring Browning's query, asked him instead: "Could you make one available for us?"

Seeing that Chester's inquiry was a serious one, Browning gave him the direct answer: "Subject to F.O.L.E.M.'s blessing—and I'm pretty sure he'd O.K. it—yes. We've two at Alex. at the moment."

"Thanks," said Chester, gently removing Browning's box of matches from the breast pocket of Loxby's khaki shirt and returning it to its owner, and adding: "I ought to have warned you that Loxby prefers O.P. matches to other brands."

"He's not the first," laughed Browning. "I've met people who fancy Other People's tobacco and cigarettes as well."

By way of reaction to his senior's good-natured chaff, Loxby puffed hard at his pipe and retired in silence behind the resulting smoke-screen.

After a moment's pause Browning said: "You haven't yet told me what you want this submarine for, Chester."

"Even if we used all our men for the job," answered the elder soldier, "we can't just rush at it like a bull in a china shop. We really must be a bit more subtle than that. We must stage a diversion—a good noisy one—which will draw the attention of Carvellis's gang right away from the house shortly before we raid it. It must, of course, be a complete surprise, otherwise it's no good. And my idea was to use a submarine for that. It could go round the island unobserved by any E.P.I.R.E.S. vessel which may be on patrol, enter Suda Bay, and surface after dark alongside the wreck of the *York*. A party would go aboard—part of the upper deck is still above water—and lay a number of charges with time fuses. The result should be a proper Brock's benefit. And it should be more than adequate to keep the E.P.I.R.E.S. occupied for several hours. They'd still be trying to find out 'who done it' next morning. And my chief reason for suggesting a submarine is to ensure that they'll never find the answer to that one. The whole operation is, of course, highly suspect from the point of view of international law and all that sort of thing. And though we could doubtless argue that in the circumstances we were quite justified, it'll be much better to avoid such an argument altogether."

Only when Chester stopped speaking and lit a cigarette did Browning comment admiringly: "An idea after my

own heart, Chester. Whether it's practicable is another thing. Much depends on the depth of water in Suda Bay. I shall have to go down to R.N.G.H.Q. and get a chart."

"Don't worry," answered Chester, rising and going to a cupboard by the window, "I've one here."

Helped by Loxby, he unfolded the large sheet of stiff white paper and laid it on the table. For a couple of minutes Browning studied the plan of Suda Bay and its approaches. At last he said: "Looks all right, Chester. The last word in a case like this will have to rest with the C.O. of the submarine, because entering such restricted waters submerged is not exactly easy. There's more than a chance of running ashore. That's the theory of it. But in practice our submarines never give a second's thought to such risks if the thing is at all possible. So I think you can count on our help there."

"Splendid!" responded Chester. "That's eased my mind a lot. What about the chaps necessary for laying the charges? Will you want any help?"

"No, thanks," said Browning. "You can leave all that to us." He refrained from stating that, if anybody had to climb about the slimy seaweed-covered deck of a half-sunken wreck, a sailor was likely to do it more successfully than a soldier, even in broad daylight, and, after dark, many times more so.

"Right!" answered Chester. "That means we shall only want Number One and Two Patrols."

"One officer and six men each," said Loxby.

"And stores?" queried Browning.

"About a hundred pounds a man, sir—ammunition and food chiefly—and also a wireless set."

Browning made a rapid mental calculation: "Two M.L.s will do it," he said. "One for each patrol—provided you don't exceed that estimate."

"Loxby probably will if he's given the chance," laughed Chester. "It's wonderful what the British soldier will try and take with him even when he's been told he's only going to be away for a few days and to

cut his kit to a bare minimum. But I'll see that they're screwed down on that score."

The trio were at this point interrupted in their discussion by the arrival of a clerk with three cups of tea, and, as a result, for a brief period they relaxed to talk of other matters. When they resumed consideration of the coming operation it was to settle such details of the plan as D-Day and zero hour for the attack on Carvellis's house, times and places of departure for the submarine and the M.L.s, similar data for the former's arrival at Suda Bay and the latter's visitation to the south coast of Crete, routes to be followed by the patrols in their march across the island, and many other minor but none the less important points.

It was after seven in the evening when Chester remarked to Browning: "I think that's about as far as we need go. I shall have to prepare some sort of orders for this show to-night. Loxby'll want to warn the patrols that they'll be moving to Tobruk to-morrow. And I imagine that you'll have your hands full fixing up your side of the show."

"True enough," answered Browning. "I hadn't reckoned on you chaps being able to get going so quickly. Not," he added hastily, "that I regret that in the least. I've my own reasons for not wanting to waste any time. I shall have to return to Alex. to-night. But there's just one point. You, I take it, will be going with one of the patrols and Loxby the other."

"Yes," nodded Chester.

"I'd be uncommonly grateful," continued Browning, "if you'd allow me to come with you. You'll understand why. I know perfectly well that, so far as you're concerned, the object of this operation is to pinch Carvellis. Rescuing Miss Maitland can only be a side-line. I'm hoping I might get a chance to do that. But I'll give you my word I won't do anything to embarrass your side of the show."

"My dear Peter," answered Chester warmly, "I shall be only too glad, after the magnificent help you gave me last time."

Just twenty-four hours later His Majesty's Submarine *Penguin* slipped from her berth alongside the depôt ship in Alexandria harbour, went astern into the main channel, and turned her bows towards the breakwater entrance. The half-dozen white sweater-clad seamen fallen in upon the forward casing, the coxswain at the wheel in the conning-tower, the petty officer telegraphist below in the wireless office, the overalled engine-room artificer tending the diesels, imagined their boat was proceeding to sea for exercises.

The *Penguin* passed the mighty grey hull of the *Colossus*, the burnished steel muzzles of her eight fifteen-inch guns glistening in the late afternoon sun. The leading signalman in the conning-tower blew a shrill blast on his whistle, the crew on the forward casing came to attention, the Captain in the conning-tower stood up and saluted. And on the quarterdeck of the battleship the quartermaster whistled shrilly in reply, and the young lieutenant on watch, tucking his telescope more securely under his arm, acknowledged the submarine's salute. This time-honoured exchange of courtesies took place between the *Penguin* and each warship she passed on her way to the sea. And those who noted her passing also imagined she was proceeding for exercises.

Only when the submarine was clear of the harbour, clear of the Great Pass, the long dredged channel leading out to the open sea, and the skyline of the city of Alexandria had almost disappeared below the horizon astern, did the Captain reveal to his officers and men the contents of the Top Secret orders he had received earlier that afternoon. Only then did they learn something of the unusual operation which they had been ordered to execute, an operation which the older and more experienced members of the crew reservedly referred to as interesting, whilst the younger, in their hearts at least, classed it as exciting.

The *Penguin* was en route for the Aegean—and Suda Bay.

Next day, three hundred miles to the west of

Alexandria along the northern shores of the African Desert, amidst the ruins of the fortress of Tobruk, M.L.s 659 and 670 lay alongside a half-submerged wreck which did duty for a pier. The harbour was largely filled with many other similar wrecks, mute but eloquent testimony to the effective work of R.A.F. bombers in the days when the port had been in German hands.

During the afternoon the crews of the two M.L.s, aided by the men of Numbers One and Two Patrols of Force 292, had been loading the latter's stores, securing them wherever there was space upon the upper deck. At six in the evening Gerald Chester, accompanied by Michael Loxby and Peter Browning, climbed aboard. For a moment they stood in a group by the bridge of M.L.659, which occupied the inside berth.

"All set, Loxby?" asked Chester.

"All ready."

"Right! See you at the rendezvous in three days' time. Don't be late, and *don't* break W/T silence before then except in an emergency. Good luck!"

Loxby acknowledged his senior's instructions with a salute before climbing over the guard rails on to the deck of M.L.670 to join his own patrol.

"Well," commented Chester to Browning, "off we go."

Peter nodded to the young skipper of the M.L., who stood waiting on the bridge. In response to a brief order, M.L.670 slipped, and, with a gentle movement of engines, edged her way out into the stream. Then number 659 slipped from her berth and went ahead towards the harbour entrance. Without signal her consort dropped into station astern.

Half an hour later, as the sun set, the two craft were heading for Crete at a steady fifteen knots.

XIII

AT BREAKFAST in Shephard's Hotel on the morning after he had flown to Cairo with Browning, John Prentice received a telephone message. It was to the effect that the meeting of the Combined Communications Board, which he had anticipated attending at nine, had been postponed until eleven.

Laying down the *Egyptian Mail*, he finished his coffee, lit a cigarette, and wondered what he should do with himself during the intervening two hours. Joan's suggestion that he should buy some perfume from the Muski for her birthday came into mind. The impertinent wench didn't deserve a present, of course, but—well, she was his cousin, and she wasn't at all a bad sort really; quite a credit to him, in fact. And since he'd never yet visited the great bazaar quarter of old Cairo, it was high time he rectified that omission.

Another reason for visiting the Muski did occur to him: the possibility of finding Suliman Daub—the particular Suliman Daub—out of a score or more, whom the security police were so anxious to trace. But he soon dismissed the idea. There was no earthly reason why he should succeed where the police had failed.

A quarter of an hour's ride brought Prentice from the modern Cairo of blatant luxury to the ancient Cairo of filthy poverty. The transformation of scene could hardly be more complete. He started amidst tall white twentieth-century buildings, great blocks of flats, elegant shops, big mansions and villas lining wide avenues, which the flamboyant trees clothed in flaming scarlet and the jacarandas in deepest blue. He finished in narrow cobbled streets, lined higgledy-piggledy with hundreds of tiny dark shops open to the pavement, where craftsmen worked with their ancient tools, and men, all dressed alike in *galabieh* and *tarbouche*, sat bartering and

drinking interminable coffee. It was deplorably squalid; but it was here that the real people of Cairo lived, where life was vivid and extremely cheerful, always clamant, and seldom imperceptible to the nose.

Above the clamour of life which rose from this ant-heap of humanity there was one particularly strident, unavoidable noise. Few, if any, of the shops were without loudspeakers, from which poured forth the Arabic programme of the Egyptian State Broadcasting Company. To European ears it was a never-ending, constantly repeated, irritatingly insistent, anguished dirge, accompanied by a tuneless, rhythmic, discordant, cacophony of strange instruments.

This was the odd world in which John Prentice threaded his way through the crowds which filled the narrow streets, as he wandered slowly from shop to shop glancing idly at their wares. Much was trash—pots and pans from the factories of Birmingham, cheap cotton from the mills of Lancashire, gaudy silks and the inevitable brass curios from India. But every now and again he saw something of value—richly woven carpets from Persia, jewellery of heavy red gold or filigree silver, perfumes which seemed to contain all the spices of Arabia.

After half an hour of such wandering Prentice tired of the novelty of the scene, and stopped before the perfume shop which he had already earmarked for his purchase. He passed through the open front out of the sunlight into the darkened interior. Surrounded by bottles of every shape and size, containing liquids of many colours, stood an old man, a Methuselah in years, judged by the deep wrinkles on his dark face, who greeted his visitor with a monologue in deplorable English. It was a primitive form of high-power salesmanship: it assumed, correctly, that the majority of Europeans were gullible; that they could be persuaded to buy the cheapest article at the highest price. He reserved his more subtle perfume for the discerning few.

Prentice had been long enough in the Middle East to be alive to such tactics. He might not be an expert where

perfumes were concerned, but he was not to be persuaded to purchase until he had inspected and sampled most of the contents of the shop. And beaten the vendor's price down by at least a half. All of which occupied him for a considerable time.

It was while he was thus engaged in haggling with the toothless old Arab that he suddenly pricked up his ears. His training and experience as a signal officer had made them naturally sensitive to the sound of messages transmitted in the morse code. Whereby he was suddenly conscious that somewhere among the score or more loud-speakers installed in the neighbouring shops, from which the wailing cacaphony of Arab music assaulted his eardrums, was at least one whence there now issued a high-pitched splutter of dots and dashes.

Automatically he began to read the message. It was no more than a meaningless succession of numerals. He lost interest, and again turned his attention to selecting a birthday gift for Joan.

But he could not altogether shut out the staccato shorts and longs of the morse symbols. His subconscious mind continued to read them: "364, 2516, 43172; 364, 2516, 43172;" and yet again "364, 2516, 43172"—groups of three, four, and five figures repeated over and over again. He glanced at his watch. It was just five past ten. Then this must surely be the regular daily transmission from the E.P.I.R.E.S. headquarters in Crete. That he should hear it in such surroundings could only be explained in one of two ways: either someone had tuned in to the rebel station by mistake—in which case they would hardly have left it on for so long as five minutes—or someone was listening to it deliberately because the message concerned them—in which case that someone must be one of Carvellis's agents. From this reasoning it required no great effort to deduce the likelihood of the unknown listener being *the* Suliman Daub, aided and abetted in all probability by Roger Stetson.

With sudden haste Prentice decided upon his purchase, and paid the sum asked without further argument. Then

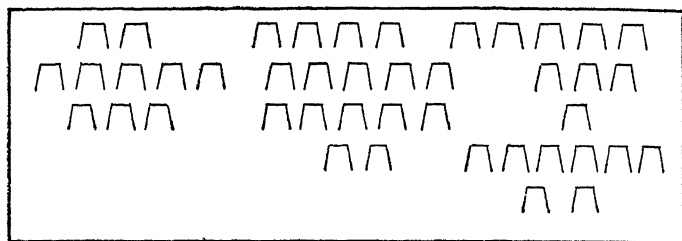
he turned out of the darkened shop into the narrow crowded street. He must trace the tell-tale loudspeaker quickly, before the fifteen-minute transmission ended. But amidst the chattering crowds, the voluble merchants, the screaming children, the many other loudspeakers all pouring forth Arab music, it was not easy to locate the origin of the morse signals. He walked up the street first one way, then the other; and repeated the process twice before deciding that they must come from one of three shops not five yards from the one in which he had recently made his purchase.

He stood still opposite these three, seemingly oblivious of the way the native crowd jostled him as some hurried, some meandered past. Which could it be—the jeweller, the maker of *tarbouches*, or the carpet vendor? Like the remainder of the shops in the Muski, none bore the name of the owner over the front. There was therefore no immediate hope of narrowing the search further by the transparent fact that one belonged to *a* Suliman Daub, the others to vendors with less relevant names.

Prentice was still puzzling this problem when the transmission abruptly ceased. Again he looked at his watch. It was a quarter past ten. Damn! To-day's broadcast message was finished. He appeared to be left with no clue which would help him in his search. He began to come to the conclusion that he could do no better than return to G.H.Q., report what he had heard to the security police, and leave it to them to be on the spot at the same time next morning. If needs be, they could then search every shop within audible range of the tell-tale loudspeaker. Suddenly something in the open front of the *tarbouche* shop immediately in front of him caught his eye.

At first glance this shop was like so many others of its kind in the Middle East. It was filled, not with red felt, black tasselled *tarbouches*, as one might expect, but with the ornamented brass moulds used for shaping the straw of which this form of headdress is made. They resemble, colour apart, nothing so much as inverted flowerpots.

They were arranged in irregular rows upon five shelves, and Prentice's impression of them can only be adequately portrayed by means of a simple sketch:



And to the casual passer-by, used to the ways of Egypt, there was nothing peculiar in such apparent disorder.

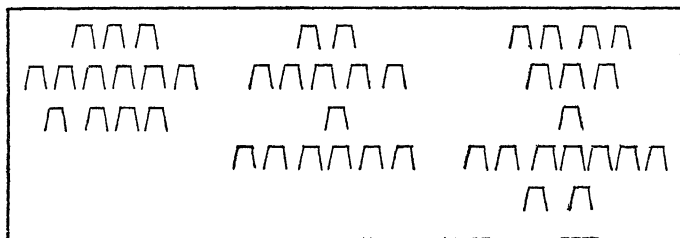
But to Prentice, whose ears still seemed to hear the high-pitched morse symbols of the coded message from Crete above all the wailing cacophony of Arab music which still surrounded him, whose mind still dwelt on the arrangement of the numbers in that message into groups of three, four, and five, the meaning of the apparently harmless disordered rows of *tarbouche* moulds was suddenly very suspicious, for they were indubitably arranged in a similar fashion to those figures. And what was more easy for Roger Stetson, forced into hiding, and thus deprived of his means of displaying the message to Carvellis's other agents from the stage, than to seek refuge in the Muski with Suliman Daub and to devise this new way of carrying out his designs.

Prentice was delighted with his discovery, for, just when he had thought that he must abandon his search, it opened up a new possibility of locating his quarry. It was true that the evidence offered by the moulds was by no means conclusive; their arrangement in such suspicious groups *might* be a mere coincidence. But it was certainly a clue worth following up.

He was debating whether he should enter the shop when an Egyptian dressed in a dark-brown *galabieh*

came out. Prentice had only a fleeting impression of particularly bright and piercing eyes and a short pointed beard before the fellow turned his back to stand immediately before the open shop-front. And from the depths of his garment he produced a rag, with which he proceeded to polish each brass mould in turn. Could this be Suliman Daub—or Roger Stetson in disguise? As if spellbound, Prentice stood watching him. To clean the moulds the stranger lifted each in turn, and he had done no more than half of them before Prentice realised that they were being replaced in different positions.

His excitement rose to boiling-point as he watched. It knew no bounds when he saw that the final result was:



For "364, 2516, and 43172" was the very message he had heard from the hidden loudspeaker only ten minutes before. That made it conclusive! This *must* be Suliman Daub's shop, *and* Stetson's hiding place. And where those two villains were, there might the stolen treaty be also. But whether the worthy Oriental gentleman who had just so clearly revealed this fact was either, had yet to be disclosed. For he had disappeared into the darkness of the shop as swiftly as he had previously emerged.

Prentice did not wait to consider the wisdom of his next action. In such circumstances his characteristic impetuosity overrode prudence. He plunged into the shop. It was dark inside; very dark after the bright sunlight out in the street. He gathered a fleeting impression of shelves bearing rows of crimson, black

tasselled *tarbouches*, by a short counter, and behind it a doorway screened by a close mesh of hanging strings of beads. He was interested only in the man who stood behind the counter. It was the Egyptian with the bright eyes and the goatee beard who had just cleaned and rearranged the brass moulds in the shop-front.

Within the folds of the sleeves of his *galabieh* the Egyptian went through motions suggestive of washing his hands, and said, in a curious high-pitched voice: "You buy *tarbouche*, sahib?"

"Yes," answered Prentice shortly.

The Egyptian turned, selected half a dozen from the shelves, and laid them on the counter; offered one to his customer to try on.

Prentice proceeded to do so. In order to gain time he tried each in turn. And whilst doing so his eyes, adjusted now to the darkness of the interior of the shop, roamed around it. One point was of interest. There was no loudspeaker visible. It could only therefore be in one place—in the inner room behind the screened doorway. He had to find some way of looking in there.

Still seeking to gain time, he placed a likely fitting *tarbouche* on his head and asked: "Have you a mirror?"

"A mirror, sahib? But certainly." From under the counter the Egyptian produced a large ebony-backed circular glass and held it up by the handle towards his customer.

Prentice suddenly had an idea, said: "I can't see here. Let me take it to the light," put out his hand as if to do so. But even as he grasped the handle he hurled the mirror from him as hard as he could. Parting the hanging strings of beads, it flew into the inner room, where it dropped with a crash on to the floor.

With an exaggerated air of apology Prentice exclaimed: "I say, how clumsy of me! I am sorry! I do hope it's not broken. Let me pick it up."

And at the same time, before the Egyptian could recover from his surprise, Prentice shot round the counter and through the doorway. The inner room was even

darker than the shop, and for a moment he experienced difficulty in making out his surroundings.

Wherefore he hesitated.

Which was fatal.

The *tarbouche* merchant, as soon as he had appreciated Prentice's action, turned, slipped through the doorway after him, and raised his right arm. The sleeve of his *galabieh* slipped down, to reveal a hand which held a short black club—a club which descended sharply with an ominous crash upon the back of the intruder's skull.

Prentice swayed forward, suddenly doubled up, and collapsed in a huddled insensible heap upon the floor. At once a figure, indistinguishable in the half-light, slipped into the room through a doorway on the far side from the shop.

"That was well done, Daub, my friend," he said.

Suliman Daub, still speaking in a high-pitched voice, but now in excellent English, answered: "The young fool played into my hands, *Herr* Stetson."

Roger Stetson kicked the unconscious form of John Prentice. "He'll give us no trouble for a while. Quick! Help me carry him upstairs."

Together Roger Stetson and Suliman Daub carried their visitor up the narrow stairs into the room over the shop and dumped him on an ancient and much-worn couch.

The Egyptian said: "How much do you think he knows?"

Stetson, a scornful smile upon his lips, answered: "I neither know nor care—*now*. It is sufficient that he must know something, or he would not have stood in the street staring at this shop for so long. It is fortunate that I recognised him in time to warn you."

"What do we do now?"

Roger Stetson did not reply immediately. Lazily he lit a cigarette, placed it in one corner of his sensuous mouth, let it hang limply from his thick lips. At last he said: "Daub, my friend, it is unfortunate and damnedly inconvenient, but it cannot now be safe for either you

or me to stay here. You must let it be known that you have received a message that your brother who lives in Zag-a-Zig is dying; that you must go to him at once. You will shut up the shop, and we will depart."

If any of the neighbours of Suliman Daub displayed any interest in his sudden departure an hour later, they saw no more than the bright-eyed Egyptian with the pointed beard leading a camel bearing two large wicker panniers slung across its hump. And, following behind, dressed inevitably in a long black robe, and, as inevitably for Egypt, heavily veiled, the woman who had been lodging with the *tarbouche* merchant during the last few days. They could not know that this was Roger Stetson in disguise any more than they could know that one of the camel's panniers contained the bound and gagged body of John Prentice.

Apart from her short interview with Roderigo Carvellis which has already been recorded, Tania Maitland did not see the E.P.I.R.E.S. leader again during the submarine's voyage to Suda Bay. Locked in the tiny cabin, she was cut off even from the limited outside world of the boat's interior. She only guessed that they had reached their destination by the sounds of increased activity on the part of the crew and the heavy vibration of the engines as they were put to astern, followed by the relief of sudden and complete stillness which ensued after the vessel had been secured alongside.

Then she heard a key turn in the lock. The door was opened by a Cretan youth dressed in black breeches, a much-worn and now grubby shirt, leather bandolier, and green armband. It was the uniform, if one may so debase the word, worn with variations by all members of the E.P.I.R.E.S. forces. He carried a weapon of the tommy-gun family. Like the majority of the E.P.I.R.E.S. arms, it was a legacy of the days when Crete had been occupied by German forces. The young rebel could not have been much more than twenty, but he affected the authoritative manner of one many years older.

In an ugly nasal voice he greeted Tania in English with the curt words: "You will come with me."

After the two days and nights she had been cooped up in the submarine's tiny box-like cabin she was only too ready to comply, whatever the unknown future might have in store for her on the island of Crete. From the time that she emerged into the welcome light of day until she was ushered into a waiting car on the jetty alongside which the submarine had berthed, she had little chance to look around. She was preoccupied in cautiously treading her way across a gangway no wider than a single plank, and climbing up the rusty iron rungs of a vertical ladder. Though in mounting this, with the Cretan youth close behind, it did momentarily occur to her—as the smallest and least important thing will enter the human mind on relatively inappropriate occasions—that it was fortunate that she had chosen to wear for that now distant afternoon's visit to Aboukir Bay a pair of grey flannel slacks offset by a simple canary yellow aertex shirt and a dark-blue, high-necked jersey. She could not have chosen a more serviceable rig had she known at the time the ordeal which was in store for her.

Then followed half an hour's drive up a narrow winding road between high banks and hedges into the foothills on the southern shore of the bay. Towards the end they came to a guard-post. The car momentarily halted, and the Cretan youth, who occupied the rear seat beside Tania, responded to a sentry's challenge. After this the road entered the deep shadows of a thick wood. A further half-mile brought them to a clearing, with, in its centre, a two-storeyed whitewashed stone house with a sloping red-tiled roof. Here her guard, whose name she gathered was Simonopoulos, was clearly well known by the two similarly uniformed but unarmed men who opened the door. Their conversation, though animated, was amicable. And they did not question his right to escort Tania up the staircase and along the first floor passage. At the end he opened a heavy panelled door of some dark-stained wood and stood aside for her to enter. He

allowed her barely time to cross the threshold before he closed the door again. Instinctively she swung round, only to hear the key turn in the lock. Once more she was alone.

She turned to inspect her new quarters. The room was pleasant enough. Though simply furnished, it was clear that, whoever had been responsible for this, possessed both taste and a sense of comfort. Hardly a prison, yet prison it clearly was. For, in addition to the locked door, the window was barred by a pair of heavy slatted shutters which, incidentally, deprived her of any view of the outside world and the room of much of the daylight.

The hours which followed seemed to her interminable. There were, curiously, a few English books in the room, but she soon tired of attempting to read any of them. Her mind, seeking always to pierce the mists which surrounded her future, could not concentrate for long even on the lightest of fiction. It was a relief when, punctually at three o'clock the next afternoon, Simonopoulos, the young rebel who appeared to be her personal guard, presented himself at her room, escorted her down on to the lawn which filled the clear area in front of the house, and, for an hour, allowed her to walk around it for exercise. It amused her to note that throughout this proceeding he seemed to think she was so likely to attempt to make a bolt for it that his finger never strayed far from the trigger of the weapon which he carried thrust under his right arm. She tried once to engage him in conversation, but he remained surlily silent. She was no more successful with the greasy-haired slatternly-featured, Greek woman, Anna, who brought her meals and cleaned her room. Though in this case the reason was understandable: the creature was a deaf mute.

She saw Carvellis only once; that was on the second evening. He slouched into her room, without the preliminaries of a knock, his hands thrust deep into the pockets of his baggy black trousers. She was standing by the window at the time, and he came straight across

to her, his bloodshot eyes concentrated upon her in a fierce stare.

There was little sincerity in his first remarks. They sounded no more than the carefully rehearsed phrases of one who is not used to civilities.

"Miss Maitland," he began, "I regret that it has not been possible for me to visit you before. I have been busy. There has been much for me to do since I returned. I trust that Simonopoulos and Anna have met your needs."

If he imagined that his speech would be received graciously, or even in a spirit of polite tolerance, he was rapidly disillusioned. She remained silent, and continued to face him with a suggestion of scorn, with which was mingled proud defiance, upon her lovely features.

"Please sit down," he said, only it did not sound like that. His ill-accented English removed all vestige of politeness from the phrase.

She did not move.

"Very well," he said; "but *I* am a little tired."

He drew forward an easy-chair and slumped into it. She turned away towards the fireplace, over which a large gilt-framed mirror was mounted, as if studying her own image, but in fact taking the opportunity to watch his expression without revealing her own. She could divine nothing but evil behind the countenance of the ill-kempt figure huddled in the chair.

"Miss Maitland," he continued, "three nights ago I gave you some indication of why I was bringing you to this island—because I thought you would be of use to me. I also indicated the alternative, but the prospect of becoming *Herr* Stetson's mistress did not appeal to you. I congratulate you on such a decision. If Stetson has a fault, it is his vanity, particularly where women are concerned. You are not the first to dislike him for that. You needn't consider any question of personal relations with me."

As Carvellis continued speaking, his eyes seemed to flash with the light of some hidden fire within. He leaned

forward in his chair, gripping the arms between his short nicotine-stained fingers.

"Miss Maitland," he said, "you are a woman of the world—a beautiful one. *And* you are an actress."

She had long been accustomed to meeting those many ignorant members of her own race who harboured the out-dated idea that an actress was practically synonymous with the oldest profession in the world. Yet it seemed unspeakably vile to hear it from the lips of the man who now held her in his power.

But he was still speaking: "I have found by experience that when men stand in my way it is not always desirable to kill them——"

She gave an involuntary shudder at the cold, matter-of-fact way in which he spoke the last words.

"—Sometimes they are more useful alive, provided they are bent to my will. I shall use you, Miss Maitland, to achieve that for me."

To Tania one thing was becoming clear. Roderigo Carvellis might not be mad, but he was certainly suffering from megalomania in an acute form. Women probably did mean nothing to him so far as any personal relations between the sexes were concerned. To him all men—and women—were mere puppets, to be allowed to live only if he so chose, and only then if animated by his will, to dance to whatever tune he might call; and, when he had done with them, to be cast aside. Very well, she too would be one of his puppets, would dance to his tune—for just so long as it suited her cold determination to regain her freedom. He had talked of making use of her histrionic talents: they could be used to more ends than one. . . .

She turned suddenly, faced Carvellis and asked: "What do you want me to do?"

Relaxing a little, Carvellis answered: "To-morrow I go to Athens. The principal members of the Greek Government are being extremely tiresome. I need an ally among them, but not one has so far proved susceptible to bribery. To me that is unaccountable. It is

possible that my agent in the capital is not doing his work properly. I intend to investigate the matter myself. I have in mind the likelihood that where bribery has failed you may succeed, Miss Maitland. Your first job may be in Athens after I return—in four days' time."

"You mean," she said, "that there is nothing for me to do until then?"

He nodded in reply to her question.

She said: "You expect me to remain locked in this room alone all that time? Is that the way you treat those who work for you—General?"

With a sudden jerk, Carvellis rose from his chair and faced the woman whose help he had decided to enlist. His little eyes flashed as he snapped: "How I treat you—or any one else—Miss Maitland, is my affair." He paused a moment and continued in an easier tone: "But I will give instructions that from to-morrow you may go anywhere in the house and grounds you please. But beyond"—and here the snap returned to his voice—"beyond, no!"

XIV

FOR TANIA the days which followed inevitably passed slowly, though freedom to wander in the woods which surrounded the house went some way towards alleviating her boredom. She saw no one save Anna, the Greek deaf mute; Simonopoulos, her young braggart of a guard; the two other members of the E.P.I.R.E.S. who were Carvellis's servants; and the guards who patrolled the high barbed-wire fence which surrounded the estate.

From her wanderings she judged this to be roughly circular in shape, with a diameter of perhaps half a mile. With the exception of the clearing in the middle which contained the house and its garden, the area was filled with closely planted trees of many varieties whose names she did not know. The wood extended farther than the

barbed-wire fence, so that she was unable to see in any direction what lay beyond.

There was seldom a moment in those days when her mind did not seek, sometimes in a spirit of calm reflection, but more often in a mood of desperation, for a means whereby she might escape, not from the island, for that was quite beyond her comprehension, but from the clutches of Roderigo Carvellis. If she could but get away into the hills she might find friends among the Greek peasants even as Peter had done. But the fence was so constructed that no human, least of all a woman, could climb it.

When the sixth day dawned—the day on which Carvellis was due to return from Athens—she was no nearer a solution. That evening, long after the sun had set, Simonopoulos came to her room. With the attitude of studied indifference and the irritating nasal voice she had learned to expect from him, he said: “The General wants to see you.”

In silence she followed the youth down the stairs into the hall. There he walked straight over to the door on the left and flung it open. A stream of light shone out from the room beyond, and from within she heard a voice say in evil-accented English: “Come in, Miss Maitland—please.” The last word was added as an afterthought.

Tania braced herself for the coming interview. She took a pace forward. The light streaming out through the open door shone suddenly upon her lovely features, her golden hair. There passed through her mind the hundreds of times she had stood in the theatre awaiting her entrance, when the limes had thus come stealing her out of the wings. As then, so now, she became Tania Maitland the actress—and made her entrance: as a proud, supremely self-assured, very beautiful woman.

She was conscious at once of her audience: one man seated at a flat-topped desk placed diagonally across a corner of the room. His swarthy face was brilliantly illuminated by a bright cluster of five electric lamps arranged round an ornamental bronze pendant suspended

by three chains from the centre of the ceiling. She heard Simonopoulos close the door behind her, and knew that once again she was alone with Roderigo Carvellis.

He waved his right arm in the direction of an easy-chair by the side of the fireplace and said: "Sit down, Miss Maitland."

With unhurried steps she walked across the room and complied. Carvellis half-turned in his chair towards her.

"Miss Maitland," he said suavely, "four nights ago I told you I was going to Athens to find out why my agent had failed to bribe a member of the Government to act in accordance with my wishes. I discovered the reason. He had been got at by British agents working in league with the Greek police. They had dared to bribe *him*."

Carvellis brought his fist down with a crash on the desk as he continued: "I will not tolerate that kind of interference with my organisation. You will leave for Athens to-morrow to succeed where he has failed. But first a word of warning. Do not imagine that in Greece you will be able to double-cross me. I shall send two men to work with you. They will have orders to watch you *and not to hesitate to use a knife* should it be necessary to ensure that you hold your tongue!"

Tania could scarcely conceal a shudder, so ominous was the threat in Carvellis's last words. There could be no doubt that the cold-blooded villain who now faced her meant every one of them.

Carvellis continued: "These are your instructions——" But he got no further. The door was suddenly flung violently open, and two men in the uniform affected by the E.P.I.R.E.S. hurried into the room. They were the two rogues who served Carvellis as his principal lieutenants: Amigo the Spaniard, who spoke with a lazy American drawl, and Joseph the shifty-eyed Jew.

Carvellis half-rose from his chair to meet them. "What is the meaning of this intrusion, Amigo, Joseph?" he rasped angrily. "I left word that I was not to be disturbed."

"I guess you'll be disturbed all right, General," drawled the Spaniard, "when you hear our news."

Joseph, displaying considerable agitation, exclaimed in short staccato phrases: "It is an urgent message from Sigma. The treaty has been lost!"

In the moment's silence which followed the Jew's announcement, Tania, who was watching Carvellis, thought he was about to have an apoplectic fit. His fists suddenly clenched, his face flushed a deep crimson, his thin lips curled back in an angry snarl.

At last he managed to utter a single word: "Impossible!"

In answer, Amigo laid a sheet of paper on the desk in front of Carvellis, saying: "When you read that, General, maybe you won't think *Herr* Stetson's quite such a slice of cake. If you ask me he's a bum, a sucker——"

Perhaps the Spaniard had more to say, but he was silenced by Carvellis, who almost screamed at him: "Silence, Amigo!" A little more calmly he added: "When I want your comments I'll ask for them. Until then keep your bloody mouth shut!"

Amigo stuffed his hands deep into his trouser pockets and answered casually: "O.K., General. Just as you say."

Carvellis's eyes dropped to read the message from his agent in Egypt. As he did so he commented aloud to himself: "So it's true! Stetson and Suliman Daub have failed me. They have allowed that young swine of an Englishman to make fools of them."

Joseph, unable to keep still for one moment in his agitation, burst out with a string of questions: "What are we to do, General? How can we make trouble in Egypt now? Unless we are quick, there will be nothing to stop the British coming here. We shall be ruined."

Carvellis raised his right arm and pointed one finger accusingly at the Jew. "You lily-livered Yid!" he hissed. "Have you taken leave of your senses? This message may be bad news. But do you take me for such

a useless fool that I can devise no other way? There is still the *Colossus*—and that cannot fail.”

Tania, a silent witness of this explosive scene, had been exhilarated to hear that someone—presumably John—had succeeded in recovering the stolen treaty to the discomfiture of her *bête noire*, Roger Stetson. Now she was suddenly intensely interested. She knew that there was some unsolved mystery attached to the passage of the new battleship *Colossus* through the Suez Canal. It seemed she was about to hear the solution of that mystery, since Carvellis and his henchmen appeared to have forgotten her presence in the room.

Amigo ensured this for her, for he drawled: “The *Colossus*? I don’t get it——”

Carvellis had regained his composure. Sinking back in his chair, he clasped the fingers of his two hands together across his chest and said quietly: “Just now there’s a brand new British battleship in Alexandria Harbour. She’s due to pass through the Suez Canal in four days’ time. At Port Said one of my Z weapons will be placed in each of her magazines——”

“Z weapons?” interrupted the Jew, whose agitation had somewhat subsided.

“A little invention of mine, Joseph. I have been keeping it for just such an opportunity as this. They are small charges containing a new and exceptionally powerful explosive compounded of amatol and T.N.T. A spoonful is sufficient to explode a ship’s magazine. The fuse is a midget wireless receiver which responds to ultra-high frequency radiations, the only wireless waves which are not screened by the steel hull of a ship.”

“I guess you’ve got something there,” drawled the Spaniard. “But, say, how do you get ‘em aboard an English warship. Seems impossible to me.”

“Not to me, Amigo,” answered Carvellis expansively. It clearly pleased him to expound a plan which involved the use of a weapon of his own clever devising: “Theta will do it—disguised as a harmless gully-gully man. If he is questioned, a young chicken produced very

mysteriously from the mouth or an egg from behind the ear will disarm all suspicion. And the Egyptian costume, the *galabieh*, is more than enough to conceal half a dozen of my little Z weapons.

"I shall leave to-morrow morning by submarine, and land along the coast to the east of the Canal. I shall watch for the *Colossus* at *Gare 17*. As the ship reaches the only part in the whole length of the Canal which is cut through the rock, I shall operate my transmitter. The battleship will blow up and sink, and the Canal will be blocked for months, because at that point it is impossible to dredge another channel."

Amigo expressed his admiration of Carvellis's plan with the monosyllabic expletive: "Geel!"

But the Jew was not so easily satisfied. "But how," he fussed, "does this create trouble for the British in Egypt?"

There was a complacent smile on Carvellis's face as he answered: "You need not worry about that, my friend. Since *Herr Stetson* cannot be trusted, I shall stay in Egypt to see to that myself. It only needs a few hints in the right quarter. I shall suggest that the explosion was part of a subtle British plot designed to justify the retention of British troops in Egypt on the grounds that they were essential to safeguard the passage of ships through the Canal."

Tania, still ignored by the three men, realised that she was in possession of the details of an evil plot to destroy a British warship which, even if it had no other effect on the course of the world's history, must cost the lives of many British officers and men. Escape from Carvellis was no longer a matter affecting herself alone: somehow she had to get away in order to give warning of the danger which threatened the *Colossus*.

But how? How? How?

That question whirled round and round in her brain. And the need for a solution was desperately urgent, since Carvellis was due to leave in his submarine early the very next morning.

It was at this point that Amigo for the first time showed interest in Tania's presence. With a glint of lust in his eyes, an ugly leer upon his swarthy face, he drawled: "Hallo, a dame! A be-utiful dame! Say, General, what's the big idea?"

This question from one of his subordinates was more than Carvellis was prepared to stand. He rose suddenly from his chair, leaned forward across the desk, swung his right arm, and caught the Spaniard a swinging blow on the side of his jaw. And, having done so, he cried: "That'll teach you to keep your ugly trap shut, Amigo, and to mind your own business. Miss Maitland is my affair!"

There was a moment's tense silence whilst the Spaniard recovered from the effects of the blow. He was rubbing the side of his jaw gingerly, when suddenly from somewhere in the distance outside there was the loud report of a heavy explosion.

Joseph started violently and stepped back sharply.

Carvellis snarled: "What the devil was that?"

By way of reply there was another and even more violent explosion.

Amigo moved quietly over to one window and drew back the curtains. Carvellis again snarled: "What's the use of that? You can't see through the trees."

The house shook violently with the roar of a third explosion.

Carvellis was trying to use the telephone. He was almost spitting into the mouthpiece as he exclaimed urgently: "Operator! Operator!" at the same time rattling the switch on the instrument up and down. Receiving no reply, he pressed the bell on the right of his desk. It could be heard ringing insistently in the distance.

The door opened to admit Simonopoulos.

"What is going on?" cried Carvellis. "Where are those explosions coming from?"

Simonopoulos's reaction was in direct contrast to the urgency of Carvellis's question, the rigid fear in Joseph's

eyes, the tense watchfulness of the Spaniard. He implied that he neither knew nor cared, even if his words were no more than: "No idea, General."

Carvellis at that moment must have felt that he was surrounded by three of the most inept men he had had the misfortune to enlist in his service. But whatever his defects, it could never be said that he was slow when the situation demanded action. He cried: "Get my car at once. We must investigate. Come, Joseph! You, too, Amigo!"

And, as Simonopoulos turned to comply, he stalked out of the room. With a display of fawning servitude such as an ill-treated dog explicably gives to a brutal master, the Jew followed him. Neither so much as glanced at Tania, who throughout had remained silently seated in the chair by the fireplace.

But the Spaniard had other ideas. He turned and strode across to her, seized her arms, pinioning them to her sides, and, before she had had time to react, had dragged her out of the chair.

"A beautiful dame was what I said, Sister," he drawled, "and the General's got no monopoly where dames are concerned on this little island."

Tania was struggling but she was powerless to free herself from Amigo's grip. Outside, the noise of a car engine being started up could be heard, followed, even as the house shook with the reverberating roar of yet another explosion, by the voice of Carvellis crying: "Amigo! Amigo! Where are you? Hurry! Hurry!"

The Spaniard leered at Tania. His face was now so close to her that she was all too unpleasantly conscious of the objectionable odour of his breath. He said: "Seems I haven't much time just now, Sister. So it'll just have to be a kiss. But I'll be back later for more, babe—back later for more!" With which words he endeavoured to fasten his thick lips upon hers.

Determined somehow to avoid such a distasteful assault, Tania suddenly drew back her right foot and kicked as

hard as she could. The point of her shoe struck Amigo very sharply on the shin.

The Spaniard was sensitive to pain. And his reaction was immediate. He let out a roar of rage and snarled: "You little bitch!" Then he released her, save for a firm grasp of her right wrist. And, swinging her round, he twisted that arm very hard. The pain was excruciating, and Tania was quite unable to suppress an involuntary agonised scream.

Amigo only laughed sadistically and said: "You just wait until I come back, Sister," and hurried out of the room.

But it is doubtful whether Tania was aware of this. Even as the Spaniard had let her go, her legs collapsed beneath her, and she dropped to the ground, an inert heap, in a dead faint.

For which weakness there was every justification. For more than a week she had suffered more anxieties and terrors than any woman should be called upon to bear. On top of the mental strain, she had had without warning to defend herself against Amigo's assault. And the shock of sudden physical pain had been more than her endurance, already stretched to breaking-point, could stand.

She did not hear the sound of the front door of the house being slammed by Amigo as he went out, nor of the car's racing engine as it departed with Simonopoulos at the wheel, bearing Carvellis and his lieutenants down towards Suda Bay to find out the reasons for the heavy explosions which had so unexpectedly disturbed the night.

Nor did she notice the curious fact that a few minutes later all the lights suddenly flickered twice—and went out.

The room remained in pitch-darkness save when the distant glow of yet another of the distant explosions illuminated the sky beyond the trees which surrounded the house, and cast a pale reflection of itself upon the window from which Amigo had drawn back the curtains.

Then followed a short period of utter silence.

And then somewhere outside there was a long low whistle—a human whistle.

Roderigo Carvellis might, with some justification, condemn Roger Stetson for losing the stolen treaty. But he could not know that the circumstances attending it could hardly be attributed to that individual. . . .

The domestic camel is a shaggy, ungainly beast, with a singularly placid and taciturn temperament. He progresses, unless otherwise urged, at a quiet walking pace. But he will on occasions increase speed to a trot. In either case his movements are of a rolling nature, whence he has earned the sobriquet “ship of the desert,” though anything less like a ship it would be hard to imagine, except possibly from the passenger’s aspect. On both camel and ship one can be equally sick.

For embarkation purposes the camel settles gently down—forelegs giving way beneath it first, then the rear—into a recumbent position on the ground. This attitude, save when the animal is made fast for the night, is normally only assumed by order. But—and this is the particularly relevant point—there are occasions when, temperamentally disturbed, it will halt abruptly in its tracks and sit down just where it is. That this may be in the most inconvenient part of the highway is no concern of the camel’s. And once it has made up its mind to be thus perverse, it’s the very devil to persuade it to get under way again.

From the peculiarities of the camel, we pass to those of the Egyptian State Railways. On these one might dwell at length, but we will refrain from commenting on more than one, which is the right (allowed by *force majeure* rather than the railway’s bye-laws) of passengers (local varieties) not only to travel inside the trains but also outside. And this means both on the steps, roof, and buffers of the carriages, and on the locomotive and its tender wherever it is possible to hang on, even if by no more than the proverbial eyelid.

Possibly the most important article of a seaman's faith is the undeniable fact that, if two vessels approach each other on what is called a "steady bearing," the result will be disastrous. Metaphorically speaking, it was this which occurred at Twenty Kilometre Crossing on the afternoon of the tenth of June. Plodding along the highway leading from Cairo to Benha, and approaching the point at which it crosses the railway track, was a single camel, with two laden wicker panniers slung across its hump. These were not, however, the only cross the beast had to bear. Riding upon its back was a tall Egyptian who, from his dark brown *galabieh*, bright eyes, and goatee beard, could be identified as Suliman Daub, the seller of *tarbouches* from the Muski. Similar identification of Roger Stetson in the shape of the black-veiled woman who plodded along astern of the animal was naturally impracticable—as impracticable as it was to see in one of the panniers the huddled form of John Prentice. He, incidentally, had not long recovered consciousness, and was now suffering from the threefold agony of a head which felt as if it had been struck by a sledge-hammer (which it had, more or less), from acute cramp due to his inability to move a limb (he was still bound), and from a feeling that he was likely to be seasick at any moment (a matter complicated by the fact that he was still gagged).

The road was otherwise to all appearances deserted, a point on which Stetson had but recently commented to Suliman Daub. It proved that they had escaped from Cairo without being followed by the police. This suggested the valuable fact that only John Prentice had by chance discovered their Muski headquarters. It was unfortunate that caution had necessitated abandonment of their useful strategic position in Cairo—even if Prentice had been the only individual to discover it, there was every chance, as soon as his disappearance was reported, of a search being made for him there—but the situation was by no means disastrous. Suliman Daub had a house in Benha which would serve as well. Not,

be it noted, in Zag-a-Zig. His expressed intentions of proceeding there to the succour of his sick brother had naturally been a blind.

Similarly approaching Twenty Kilometre Crossing was the Alexandria-Cairo noon express. At its head was an impressive but overworked locomotive enveloped in steam, and, as has already been explained, a large number of passengers.

Fifty yards from the crossing, Suliman Daub, with a view to ensuring that his mount was safely across the railway track before the arrival of the train, endeavoured to increase the beast's speed of advance by striking its starboard flank sharply with a stick. Unfortunately this had the opposite effect. The animal threw a temperament, and subsided gently but firmly upon the ground, in the manner previously described, across the track in front of the approaching train. The latter was promptly brought to a jarring halt, with little more than a dozen feet to spare, amidst a din compounded of screeching brakes, a piercing whistle, and loud Oriental cries.

Suliman Daub at once dismounted, and, not without agitation, endeavoured to urge the camel to "weigh anchor," a process in which he was assisted by his "female" companion. Two minutes later several score of vociferous Wogs descended from their perches on the panting locomotive, crowded round the animal, its rider and follower, and, with many gestures, proceeded to help. Which had precisely the opposite effect: the camel remained hard and fast aground.

The guard of the train and two Egyptian policemen joined the throng and elbowed their way through to the centre. It was clearly their job to remove the obstruction which was thus delaying the express. It was decided as first action to "lighten the ship" by removing the two panniers from across the camel's back. A score too many of willing helpers came to the assistance of officialdom. "Too many cooks," combined with the weight of the baskets, resulted in one being dropped. It broke

open, to reveal the immobile but conscious form of John Prentice.

At this surprising revelation pandemonium broke loose among the crowd. Momentarily they drew back, then clustered around as thick as a swarm of bees.

Prentice emitted a prolonged groan.

The two policemen suddenly appreciated that here really was a case for *them*. They endeavoured to beat back the inquisitive crowd by the judicious use of the butts of their rifles. But with inadequate elbow-room this was not very effective.

Fortunately the long-suffering camel came to the rescue. Perhaps it suffered from claustrophobia. Anyway, it suddenly snorted, rose clumsily to its feet, scattering all before it, and made off down the road unencumbered by freight, human or otherwise, at a steady trot.

The impatient locomotive gave a triumphant whistle. Passengers and guard made a concerted rush to re-embark. And with a series of tremendous chuffs the express resumed its journey.

When the train had passed, there remained at the scene of the disturbance only the two policemen—and only then did it occur to one of them to cut the cords which bound Prentice. Stiffly he clambered out of the basket, tore the gag from his mouth, and, by dint of rubbing and stretching, endeavoured to ease his cramped limbs. Before he had finished he looked up suddenly in the direction taken by the camel. It was now no more than a rapidly disappearing cloud of dust in the distance. But hurrying after it were two figures: a tall Egyptian in a dark-brown *galabieh*, and, a little behind him, a woman robed in black. Suliman Daub and Roger Stetson, suddenly involved all too unwittingly with the police, had decided that discretion was the better part of valour, and were beating it while the going was good.

Prentice clapped his hands on both policemen's shoulders, then pointed down the road. "That man," he exclaimed urgently. "Catch him, quick!"

Somehow the police understood him. With commendable promptitude and energy they started off in pursuit.

Left for the time alone, Prentice continued to restore the circulation to his limbs, all the while cursing himself for having fallen so stupidly into Suliman Daub's clutches, and the police for having allowed the man to escape so easily; though in both respects he proved unduly pessimistic. It is true that he had shown an impetuous lack of discretion in attempting to follow up his sudden discovery of Suliman Daub's hide-out in the Muski, but . . .

His eyes suddenly lighted on the other unopened pannier lying mute by the side of the road. He wrenched off the lid, lifted the bundle of clothing lying on top, and there fell out on to the road a large and bulky brown envelope bearing across the top the black lettering, ON HIS MAJESTY'S SERVICE.

His fingers trembling with excitement, Prentice drew out the contents. A brief glance confirmed his wildest hopes. It *was* the missing copy of the treaty. What incredible luck!

A distant shout attracted his attention. He looked up. The two policemen were returning—and, by St. Christopher, his luck really was in! Between them they were escorting the protesting figure of Suliman Daub.

Prentice slipped the treaty inside his tunic. Undoubtedly it would be best if he kept that for the moment to himself.

It never entered his mind to inquire about the black-robed woman. Which is understandable, since he was as oblivious of the fact that she had been Suliman Daub's travelling companion as he was to "her" real identity.

Twenty-four hours later Lieutenant-Commander John Prentice had just finished recounting his adventures to an audience of two in Alexandria—Vice-Admiral Pulgrave and Captain "Pants" Kelly. In silent witness the recovered treaty lay upon the desk before the Admiral.

When Prentice had finished his story—and if perhaps he coloured it a little to his own advantage, who shall blame him?—the Admiral, whose smile had steadily broadened as he heard about the camel's part in the affair, rose to his feet and exclaimed: "Well, I'll be jiggered! What an astounding story!"

The Chief of Staff interjected: "They always say that truth is stranger than fiction, sir."

"And how right they are, Kelly." The Admiral turned to his Signal Officer and shook him warmly by the hand. "Anyway, I congratulate you, Prentice, on a fine piece of work. And I withdraw all my recent observations about private sleuthing. You've beaten Penn and his security blokes at their own game. The recovery of the treaty's a big load off my mind."

Admiral Pulgrave paused for a moment, then continued: "I wonder if it's too much to hope that Browning and his team will be as successful with that blighter Carvellis."

Captain Kelly commented: "'Fraid we've several days to wait before we know the answer to that one."

XV

THE HILLS on the southern side of Suda Bay rise to a height of nearly fifteen hundred feet. The upper part, uncultivated and uninhabited, is spattered with a species of low shrub and rough boulders. Some of the latter are of considerable size, and it was among them that Numbers One and Two Patrols of Force 292 were hiding during the daylight hours immediately preceding their new attempt to capture Carvellis.

The M.L.s in which they had taken passage to Crete had made the crossing without incident. The two separate landings had been achieved with that efficiency which is so marked a feature of Force 292 and all those similar British organisations which have shown that we are

unequaled at "cloak-and-dagger" warfare. Thereafter, travelling in couples by night and hiding by day, the two patrols had traversed the island and rendezvoused in this well-chosen spot in the Suda hills.

Towards the evening, Browning, Chester, and Loxby spent some time in cautious observation of the hillside which lay before them. They wanted to print indelibly on their minds the most practical route to follow in the darkness some hours later. The path taken by a small flock of bleating mountain sheep served as a guide down to the point where cultivation began. From there they would have to cross two vineyards to arrive at the outer edge of the wood, in the middle of which they could just distinguish the clearing which contained Carvellis's house, though its roof was invisible above the tops of the surrounding trees.

Having settled their route down the hill, Chester and Loxby called their respective patrols together and briefed them for the night's operation. Browning was an interested and much concerned listener.

An hour after the sun had sunk below the low-lying green hills to the west and night had spread its pall of darkness over the placid waters of Suda Bay, Chester called all his men together for a final word.

"Well, men," he said when they had gathered round him, "you all know what to do, but there are a few points I want to remind you about. In five minutes' time we start moving down towards the house. You'll have two hours to get there, which allows plenty of time. You can't be too cautious. If any one gives the game away now, the whole show will have to be called off. The explosions in the wreck of the *York* are due to start any time after eleven. Our show begins as soon as we hear them, and, since they'll make the hell of a bang, there'll be no mistaking 'em.

"Our object is to capture this man Carvellis, the leader of the E.P.I.R.E.S. The responsibility for making sure that we've found the right bird rests with me or Commander Browning. As soon as one of us is satisfied,

he will blow a succession of short blasts on a whistle. That is the signal to retire. If possible you should all return here, where most of our equipment will remain; but only if you are certain that you are not drawing the rebels in this direction. If there is any doubt you must go into hiding elsewhere and find your own way back to Sfakia Bay. Is that all clear?"

With their faces and hands blackened with charcoal ointment, the men were scarcely visible in the darkness even at close quarters. They murmured their assent to Chester's question.

"One other point," he continued. "As you know, there may be an English girl in the house—Miss Maitland. If we find her we shall try to take her away with us. But a word of warning. She is *not* our objective. If Miss Maitland is not found by the time we've captured Carvellis, there is to be no question of any one staying behind to search for her."

Chester paused a moment to let this point sink in before adding: "Good luck, men. That's all."

Silently the little group dispersed into the darkness to start at two-minute intervals the task of wending their way down the hill. Of the fifteen officers and men involved, Browning found the journey the most difficult. Training and experience enabled the others to travel over unknown country by night with the eyes and agility of a cat. Browning, despite his single previous exploit of this nature and the two nights he had just spent in the same way, was constantly cursing below his breath as he bumped without warning into a hard jagged edge of rock. Or else he halted, uncertain as to whether he had maintained his direction, to peer into the darkness, seeking reassurance that he was on the right track.

When he entered the wood he had only a compass to guide him. To maintain a course at sea in the teeth of a raging gale was easier than doing so through a thick mass of trees and bushes. He stumbled into water-filled holes in the damp moss-covered ground as often as he scratched his hands or tore his uniform on brambles. But at last

he reached the barbed-wire fence, and began moving to his right along its perimeter. And with still a few minutes to spare before eleven, he joined Chester and the men of his patrol who were waiting in a little group amidst the undergrowth.

Chester whispered: "One of Loxby's patrol reported ten minutes ago that they'd got down safely. They've cut the wire and are ready to go through."

"Good!" commented Browning briefly.

The patrol remained silent, almost motionless, for little more than five minutes before the peaceful stillness of the night was disturbed. Suddenly the surrounding scene was illuminated by a brilliant yellow glare which shone through the trees from the direction of the harbour. And after a short pause the silence was shattered by the loud roar of a heavy explosion which reverberated round the near-by hills.

There was no need for Chester to explain to his men that this was the first of the expected explosions from the wreck of the *York*. The thought passed through Browning's mind that the crew of the *Penguin* had done their work well. He allowed himself to hope that the submarine had already made her escape out of the bay in safety. Then he was recalled abruptly to his own job by the voice of Chester. "Stand by!" the Major hissed to his waiting patrol.

There was a rustling in the undergrowth as the men got ready to move.

From the distance there was a second heavy explosion—first the yellow glow through the trees, then the reverberating roar.

"Now," hissed Chester.

Three men moved forward, and, with the skill of experts, started cutting and turning back the tough strands of barbed wire which formed the fence. When a gap had been made the whole party moved through, Chester leading the way, the men following in Indian file, between the trees towards the house. Browning brought up the rear.

They reached the edge of the wood. The house, lights showing round the edges of three curtained windows and streaming from the open door, lay before them.

"Wait!" commanded Chester.

The column came to a halt. Each man knew that the task of cutting the electricity supply rested with Number Two Patrol. Loxby's men should already have entered the wood and be approaching the back of the house with that object in view.

Whilst thus waiting, Browning and Chester observed the designed effect of the explosions in the harbour. A figure momentarily silhouetted against the light from the front door hurried out, switched on the head-lamps of a waiting car, and started up the engine. Two other figures followed and entered the car. A slightly agitated but unrecognisable voice reached their ears calling: "Amigo! Where are you? Hurry!" And then the unexpected occurred.

Above the murmuring of the soft breeze in the trees and the great purr of the car's engine, there came to them, as from a distance yet clear and distinct, the shrill scream of a woman.

"My God," muttered Chester, "what was that?"

Before Browning could answer there was the thunder of yet another explosion from the distant wreck. As that sound died away, a third figure hurried out of the house and climbed into the car. There was the metallic noise of the vehicle's door being slammed, the roar of its accelerated engine, and it was off down the drive.

Only as its sound was dying away in the distance down the road which led to Suda did Chester allow himself to comment in a whisper: "The cover plan seems to have worked. But I didn't like the sound of that scream one little bit."

Through clenched teeth Browning answered grimly: "If Carvellis or any of his gang have touched as much as one of Tania's head, I'll tear his guts out."

Chester placed a restraining hand on the naval officer's shoulder. "Steady, Peter," he said. "Remember you

came with me to capture Carvellis, not to embark on false heroics."

Before Browning could answer, all the lights in the house suddenly went out. And in the silence that followed they heard a long, low, human whistle.

"Loxby's signal," whispered Chester. "Forward, men!"

Chester darted out of the trees and across the lawn into the deeper shadow of the house. Almost as one man his patrol followed him. Browning was not far behind. They could hear shouts emanating from the hall.

"Calling for someone to bring a light," whispered Chester. "We'll give it to them!"

He led the way round the house and in through the front door. As soon as he was inside he snapped on a powerful torch, at the same time barking in Greek: "Hands up!"

His right hand held a revolver at the ready.

Two men in the uniform of the E.P.I.R.E.S. were standing in the hall. Dazzled by the bright beam of light, they sheepishly raised their hands. Chester continued to hold them covered whilst four of his men swiftly gagged the two servants, tied their hands behind their backs and bound their feet together.

They had hardly finished when there was the sound of someone turning the handle of the door which faced them at the end of the hall. Browning, Chester, and all the men of his patrol froze as statues. Chester switched off his torch. In the ensuing darkness they heard the door open slowly and with infinite caution.

Suddenly Chester again snapped on his torch. Once more he barked: "Hands up!"

But simultaneously the bright beam of light from another torch shone out from the direction of the door, almost blinding him. And above the sound of his own command he heard someone else bark the same order.

"For God's sake," snapped Browning, "don't shoot—either of you!"

He had been the first to appreciate that the newcomer was Loxby.

The two officers lowered their pistols and diverted the beams from their torches towards the floor. Loxby advanced into the hall, followed by his patrol.

"Sorry about that, sir," he said briefly. "Just being careful. We've been through the back of the house. There was only a woman—a servant—in the kitchen. We've fixed her."

"Good work," answered Chester. "Take your patrol and search the first floor. We'll do the rest of this one."

The young officer acknowledged his senior's order and moved up the stairs, two at a time, followed by his men. Swiftly Chester detailed his own patrol—two to remain on guard in the hall, two to take the door on the right of the hall, two that on the left.

Chester elected to go to the right. Wherefore Browning, with the two soldiers close behind him, tommy-guns at the ready, flung open the other door, and, in the fashion of Chester, switched on his torch and barked the command: "Hands up!"

The next moment he felt slightly ridiculous with the realisation that the room was apparently empty.

The beam of his torch travelled round the four walls, illuminating in turn the windows, one with its curtains drawn back, the desk on which lay a few scattered papers, the single easy-chair, with its back towards him by the fireplace.

He moved into the room. It was only as he reached the desk and was able to see over the easy-chair that the light from his torch fell upon the unconscious form of Tania Maitland lying in a huddled heap upon the floor.

Suddenly sick with apprehension, he knelt beside her. A swift examination suggested, thank heaven, that she was alive and unhurt.

He lifted her into the chair. At his bidding one of the soldiers fetched a jug of cold water from the kitchen. Browning dipped his handkerchief in it and applied the

damp cloth to her temples and forehead. She stirred and uttered a low moan.

From his hip pocket he extracted a flask of brandy and placed it to her lips, at the same time lifting her head with one hand as a support. Blood flowed again in her cheeks; life came back into her eyes.

"What has happened?" she asked in a voice hardly above a whisper.

She blinked at the unaccustomed dazzle of the torch, then closed her eyes and groaned: "Oh, leave me alone!"

Browning spoke softly to her. "It's Peter, darling. . . ."

He had to repeat himself twice before she comprehended the meaning of his words. Then she opened her eyes and looked him full in the face, lifted her arms and placed them around him as he knelt beside her chair.

"I might have known you'd come," she said. "Thank you, my dear. *Thank you.*"

"Are you hurt?" he asked.

"No." She was rapidly regaining her self-possession.

"I think I must have fainted. Stupid of me, wasn't it?"

Browning was thinking only of the urgent need for getting away from the house before E.P.I.R.E.S. forces realised that their leader's headquarters were being attacked. "Wherefore he said: "Can you manage to walk?"

"I think so."

"Please try. We must get away quickly."

The voices of Chester and Loxby could be heard outside in the hall. "I'm much afraid," said Chester, "that our bird has flown."

"Not a sign of him upstairs," responded Loxby.

"Nor down, unless Peter's found anything. Hallo," he continued, as on entering the room he caught sight of Browning in the act of helping Tania to her feet, "he has!"

"This is Miss Maitland," said Browning, making the

briefest of introductions, which Tania managed to acknowledge with a wan smile.

From her lips they received the news that Carvellis had been the first to leave the house on hearing the noise of the explosions coming from the harbour.

"Damn!" said Chester. "Just our blasted luck! It never occurred to me that he'd go and investigate 'em himself."

"Any good waiting for him to return?"

Tania joined the discussion. She said: "He may not return to-night."

"Why do you say that?" asked Chester.

In a few short sentences she outlined all that had passed between Carvellis, Amigo, and Joseph. The three officers listened with rapt attention. Only Browning, as a naval officer, realised the full import of her story. When she had finished, there was no hesitation in his voice as he said: "Whether we capture Carvellis now or not doesn't matter a damn, compared with the importance of getting this information back to Alexandria. F.O.L.E.M. must be warned about the *Colossus* without delay."

"Agreed that's important," answered Chester; "but suppose we wait and see if Carvellis comes back first. If we captured him it would spitcher the whole shooting match."

"If!" retorted Browning shortly. "There's no more than a fifty-fifty chance of him coming back. Add to that the possibility that he won't be by any means alone, and who knows that we might not live to tell the tale. I tell you, the only thing that matters now is to make damn certain of getting a message back to Alex."

Chester, trained as a soldier, imbued with ardent enthusiasm of the "cloak-and-dagger" game, could not easily appreciate the greater importance of the relatively unexciting task of passing a piece of naval intelligence back to headquarters over the thrill of capturing the E.P.I.R.E.S. leader. But after a short argument he was sufficiently impressed to meet Browning half-way.

"I'll give you two men," he said, "including one of

my signallers. Take them and Miss Maitland to our hiding-place up the hill. Wait for us there. If we rejoin you, well and good. If we have bad luck and don't come by the morning, you'll be able to signal all the stuff you want back to Alex. and then make your own escape."

"Good man," answered Browning gratefully.

Chester turned and detailed two of his men by name. Then to Browning he said: "Right, off you go! As an afterthought he added nonchalantly: "See you in the morning."

Without further words, Peter took Tania's arm and led her out into the darkness of the garden, closely followed by the two Tommies, in whose unquestioning obedience and stolid worth even the most faint-hearted could not fail to gain confidence. Which was just as well for Browning, since, though he had agreed to going off on his own at this stage, he was by no means happy at parting company with Chester. His feelings might be compared with the actor who combines the nightly performance of a small part with that of understudy for the lead and is suddenly called upon to play it.

It was a long and weary climb up the hill. A dozen times Tania, exhausted after her trying experience, faltered and would have given up. Twice when it seemed she could go no farther she urged Peter and the other two men to leave her and make their own way on alone.

The signaller, a Cockney, expressed the thoughts of all of them on one of these occasions with the words: "*Me* leave a woman to them brigands! Not bloody likely!"

So somehow they struggled on through the darkness. Long after they had cleared the wood and the vineyards and were well up among the rocks which rendered every step of the approach to their hiding-place a nightmare, the little party paused to rest for what Browning profoundly hoped would be the last time. His watch told him it was nearly four o'clock. They must finish their journey before the first light of day which could not be much more than an hour away.

They sat in a little group, resting and breathing heavily as a result of their exertions. Tania sat beside Peter, her head resting on his shoulder. She was hardly conscious of what she was doing, yet she gained comfort and strength from his arm, which rested around her.

Browning's eyes gazed wearily into the night towards Suda Bay, whose glassy waters could just be distinguished amidst the gloom of the surrounding hills. Suddenly from the middle of the wood below them there flared up the flaming glow of a tremendous explosion. It was followed by a shattering roar, and, as this was echoed back by the hills, a hot blast of air, which blew into their faces.

In the silence that followed, the Cockney signaller remarked phlegmatically: "*That* was the 'ouse, that was."

The other soldier asked: "What's happened, sir?"

Browning had a horrible feeling in his mind that a disaster had befallen Gerald Chester, Michael Loxby, and their men. But it would never do to communicate his fears to either Tania or the two Tommies. Wherefore he said with a nonchalance he was far from feeling: "We'll discuss that presently. We must reach the top of the hill before dawn. And we've all too little time."

With which remark he placed an arm around Tania, helped her to her feet and on the last lap of their nightmare climb. The two soldiers sucked their teeth audibly and followed.

The same evening Lieutenant-Commander Hardcastle was dining with John Prentice in Spinney Villas. The *Westminster* had been at sea since the day after the unsuccessful hunt for the rebel Greek submarine, and only now had it been possible for Prentice to give his friend an account of subsequent developments in the Carvellis affair. He concluded with a grumble: "It's been damnably dull these last few days. Life's seemed pretty flat after all that excitement. Since Tania disappeared, Joan's had to return to the Wrenery in order

not to ruin her moral reputation. And I'm bored stiff living here all by myself."

Hardcastle grinned. "Seems to me," he said, "that you can't have enough work to do. I don't wonder at any one being bored sitting at an office desk all day. Why on earth don't you visit your parish?"

The parochial reference was to the other ports in the Eastern Mediterranean Command under F.O.L.E.M.'s jurisdiction, at each of which Prentice had a responsibility for the efficiency of the communication arrangements.

"Ought to stay here," muttered Prentice, "until Peter gets back."

"On your own showing," retorted Hardcastle, "he can't return for at least another couple of days. You've ample time to visit the Canal area. And, by heaven, you shall! Don't you realise I'm sailing for Port Said early to-morrow? Come aboard the *Westminster* and have a blow-through. Do you a power of good. You can spend the night there, and have ample time to visit Ismailia and Suez *and* return here by road the next day."

Prentice hesitated before replying. Then he smiled. "I don't particularly want to visit Port Said or any other place in that part of the world," he said. "I take a pretty dim view of 'em all. But, by heaven, I'll not say no to a trip on the briny! Provided Master approves—and I'll ring up Flags and ask him to pop the question now—I'm with you!"

XVI

BROWNING'S unspoken fears that the explosion in the early hours of the morning had shattered Carvellis's house proved correct. As the first light of dawn diffused over the countryside he anxiously scanned the rocky slope of the hill for any sign of life. He watched thus until it was broad daylight, but he saw neither friend nor foe. Only a rather ominous column of grey smoke curled lazily skywards in the still air of the summer morning from the clearing in the midst of the wood.

Very weary, he sank back on to the patch of grass within the rough circle of rocks which constituted his hiding-place. Near him, Tania, worn out, slept. Her torn slacks, the scratches on her shoes, the dirt on her face and hands, the matted strands of her hair, all testified to her trying journey through the wood and up the hill in the dark. Browning was distressed to notice that her sleep was troubled with dreams, for every now and then she stirred, and from her lips there would issue a brief torrent of incoherent words. He realised that in the last few days her nerves had had very nearly as much as they could stand.

A few yards away the two soldiers, having in the way of the British Tommy made the best of an inadequate breakfast, were contentedly doing what they would have described as "having a fag."

Browning took his pipe out of his pocket, filled it, and when it was drawing to his satisfaction, lay back on the grass, his locked hands forming a rest behind his head, and gave himself up to thought.

It was clear that they could do nothing more until dark, by which time Tania and the rest of the party—not to mention himself—would have had twelve hours' rest. They would then have to start their journey towards Sfakia. With Tania this would take at least four nights

to accomplish. There was no question of waiting to see if Chester or Loxby and their men turned up, even supposing that they had survived the explosion which had destroyed the house. That would be against their pre-arranged plans; for from dusk on the night after the attack every member of the party, wherever he might be, was to start independently making his way to Sfakia on the south coast of Crete, where the M.L.s were expected to call in order to evacuate them back to Egypt.

The thought passed through Browning's mind that it was possible that Carvellis had been in the house at the time of the explosion and would in consequence—to put the matter into words of understatement—no longer count as a serious factor in the world. But he dismissed this as unlikely, since from Tania's evidence he had been due to sail in the submarine so early that he must have gone aboard before that disaster. It followed that his first and most important job was to signal the details of Carvellis's plan to destroy the *Colossus* back to naval headquarters at Alexandria. But this, too, had to wait for darkness, since they could not risk raising a wireless aerial from their portable transmitter during the hours of daylight. It would have been too obvious to any chance observer in the valley below, let alone E.P.I.R.E.S. patrols, who might soon be scouring the hills in search of them. Wherefore, being very tired and satisfied that nothing further could be done at the moment, he turned over on his side and slept.

It was evening when he awoke. Bleary eyed, he tried to rub the sleep out of them. The action brought his hands into contact with his now four days' old beard. He grimaced and reflected on how pleasant a bath, a shave, and a change of clothing would be at that particular moment. Then he rejected such an impracticable idea and sat up.

The Cockney signaller's voice broke in on his thoughts: "Cup o' tea, sir?"

Browning looked round. The two Tommies had obviously been awake for some time and had already

prepared a meal. One passed him a cup of well-stewed strong tea and followed it up with a thick slab of bread and butter and a slice of corned beef.

Browning took them. "Thanks," he said.

For a while he sipped and munched in silence. Food and drink put new life into him. "Miss Maitland will want some of that," he said.

He turned over to where Tania was lying, still asleep in the shade of one of the rocks. Despite her dishevelled and dirty appearance, she remained to him charming and beautiful to look upon. He remembered suddenly the advice his mother had given him many years earlier: Before you marry a girl who looks nice in Bond Street, make sure what she's like on a Scottish moor in the rain. He knew well the type that failed to pass that test.

He bent towards her and called gently: "Tania."

She stirred slightly. He called again: "Tania, my dear! Time to wake up!"

She opened her eyes, moved her limbs, and stretched herself. Then she suppressed a yawn. "Such a lovely sleep," she murmured.

"I shouldn't have described it quite like that myself," answered Browning. "However, Packham's got some breakfast for you."

The signaller passed her the same meal as that which he had recently given to Browning, except that, in deference to her sex, he had made for Tania a sandwich which less merited the description of "doorstep." She thanked him with a sweet smile, which made him her friend for life. When he got back to Blighty he'd be able to take his missus to see this lovely woman at the local Hippodrome second house Saturday night. He'd be able to tell his missus that he actually knew that lovely golden-haired creature who danced and sang so charmingly. Then, wiser counsels prevailing, he thought perhaps not. His missus might not appreciate it. A pity; but then life was like that.

Tania, having finished her meal, asked: "What time is it?"

Browning answered: "Just after seven. Sun'll be setting in a moment."

"What do we do next?"

"As soon as it's dark Packham's going to rig his wireless gear. I've a signal to send to Alexandria telling them all about Carvellis's devilish scheme. Which reminds me that I must write it out before dark."

For the next twenty minutes Browning was occupied first in writing out the message and then in helping Packham code it ready for transmission. By the time they had finished there was barely sufficient light to write by.

"All right, Packham," said Browning, "you can rig your gear now."

The signaller unstrapped and removed the waterproof cover from a rectangular metal box and lifted the lid. The controls of a wireless set were revealed. He untied a bundle of four-foot long aluminium rods, which he fitted into each other. The result was a light mast twenty feet in length, which, when erected vertically, served as an aerial. Finally he clamped a pair of telephones over his head.

Browning and Tania watched all this in silence. But as soon as the signaller began to tap out the message she asked: "Where do we go from here, Peter? I'm not exactly good at walking, I'm afraid."

"After last night, my dear," he answered, "I'm quite satisfied that you can make it. It won't be as bad as you think. Half-way down this hill on the other side there's a track which we follow up to the mountains. It won't be bad going."

He was interrupted by an oath from the signaller. No longer operating the Morse key, the man was, in so far as it was possible to see in the fading light, intent on disembowelling his set.

Browning asked: "What's up, Packham?"

"Can't get no radiation, sir."

Browning wasn't sure what this implied. "Do you mean the set won't work?"

"About it, sir."

J
b

In such circumstances there were many things Browning might have said. But, confronted with a technical matter about which his knowledge was singularly scanty, he asked with a calmness which belied the incipient apprehension within him: "You haven't passed the message yet?"

"No, sir."

"Can you repair the set?"

Packham's face emerged from inside it. "I was 'oping to, sir, but I've 'ad no luck. Oscillator valve's gone. Had two spares, but both are dud. You remember the box was dropped first night we was ashore. 'Fraid that must have done it. Very sorry, sir."

The man was obviously distressed. Browning answered him: "Never mind, Packham. Not your fault."

Though this might be perfectly true, it required a considerable effort on Browning's part to say it. For the truth was, it mattered a hell of a lot.

Tania was quick to sense that he was worried. "What's the trouble, Peter?"

"I'm trying to work something out," he answered. "To-day's the fifteenth. We can only make our way to Sfakia during the dark hours. I reckon it'll take us four nights. That brings us to the nineteenth. Motor launches are due on the eighteenth and twentieth to take us off. Our wireless is out of action. Packham can't mend it. First chance I shall have of passing my vital signal from one of the boat's sets will be the evening of the twentieth, which will be precisely twenty-four hours too late. The *Colossus* is due to transit the Canal on the nineteenth. What am I to do?"

She answered him: "If you could get to Sfakia—is that the name of the place?—one day earlier, it would be all right."

"Yes, I should board the M.L. on the evening of the eighteenth and send my signal then. It would be in Alex. before midnight. That would be in time to divert the ship before she even entered the Canal."

He paused, then added emphatically: "But it can't be done."

"Why not?" she asked.

"Because we can't do the journey in less than four nights."

"Why?" she asked.

"You're very persistent in your questions, my dear."

"I want to know," she answered pointedly, "why, when it only took you two nights to get here, it's going to take four to get back."

"Because," he answered, "you couldn't——"

She interrupted him by placing a hand over his mouth.

"Not another word," she said. "That's what I thought you were going to say. And it's why we're *going* to do it in *three* nights at the most."

She scrambled to her feet. "Come on," she said, "let's get going."

Browning leapt to his feet. Conscious that he was invisible to the two soldiers in the dark despite their proximity, he put his arms round Tania. "You perfectly splendid woman," he said, and kissed her.

Both Browning and Tania swore to themselves afterwards that they would remember that night and the two which followed for the remainder of their lives. The first was perhaps just passable. They managed the scramble down the rock-strewn hill without mishap by eleven o'clock. Thereafter they plodded in silence for mile after mile along the rough track which wound its way up the valley by the side of a stream towards the mountains. At one o'clock they halted for a meal and half an hour's rest. Then on they went until the light of day made it dangerous to go farther. Too exhausted to eat, all four fell asleep in the midst of an olive grove.

There was no shaking off the weariness which ached in their limbs when they awoke that evening. Yet on they must go. It was about three that night that Tania stumbled and fell. Though she did not hurt herself, the fall had an adverse effect on her spirits. She went on

without a word of complaint, yet Peter soon realised that she was crying softly to herself. Many a man in such circumstances would have offered a halting word of sympathy. It occurred to Browning that this would do more harm than good. He turned to the faithful Tommies who were plodding along behind.

"Packham," he said, "I think a song is indicated. Can you whistle?"

The signaller spat to the side of the track, and the deadness of the night was suddenly relieved by a pure melody of which the other two men took up the words:

It's a long, long trail a-winding . . .

Presently Browning interrupted: "Very appropriate, Packham, but couldn't we have something a little more cheerful?"

Packham's whistle died away. "'Ow's this?" he asked, and started the tune of one of Tania's songs from *Black and White*.

"Sing, darling, sing," Browning said.

Perhaps her voice quavered a little at first but she did not hesitate. Her pure soprano voice singing "Home Dearie, Home," blended perfectly with the three men's whistling. And when she had finished she found that she had forgotten her tears.

She took Browning's arm for a moment. "That's much better," she said.

When dawn came they were through the mountains. They were welcomed at a lonely farmstead by a Greek peasant and his wife, whose loyalty to the cause of Greek freedom displayed itself in the magnificent hospitality which they offered to the four travellers from their meagre stocks.

In the evening, after a sleep amidst the warm carpet of straw in a stable loft, whilst they were enjoying a good meal before once more setting out, Tania asked, not for the first time: "Can we make it, Peter darling?"

Always before he'd baulked giving her an answer. Now he thought it best to take them all into his confidence. "Listen," he said. "We've ten miles to go. We did

that last night. It's only a question of whether we can manage the same to-night."

He turned towards her and continued: "You've done marvellously, my dear. I never thought you'd do more than eight, but you must be nearly done in by now. I ought not to ask you to do even five miles to-night."

Packham echoed his sentiments. "You're right, sir. She oughtn't to move one step."

Tania, despite her weariness, managed a smile. "Thank you," she said. "But surely it's not a question of whether I'm tired. You're going on because you must reach the boat to-morrow evening. That's true, isn't it?"

She paused to look at the faces of the three men seeking an answer to her question. They gave it in the form of silence. "Very well," she continued, "I've no intention of being left behind."

And the third night they completed the journey. It was a ghastly painful nightmare, but they did it.

They spent their last day hiding in an olive grove near the summit of the steep range of hills which overlooked the little coast village of Sfakia. This time there was no need for them to move as soon as darkness fell. The walk down to the beach would not take them more than an hour, and the M.L. was not due until half-past ten.

Yet they awoke shortly before sunset, perhaps because they were overtired and ached in every limb. Blistered toes were another source of acute discomfort. Tania, in contemplation of her own normally dainty, but now sore and swollen, feet, commented ruefully: "I don't believe I shall ever dance again."

Browning answered: "Far be it from me to suggest that you shouldn't, my dear, but it won't be essential."

"What do you mean?" she asked.

He looked at her intently before replying: "I was thinking of offering you another occupation."

"Another occupation?" she queried. "But I wouldn't dream of giving up the stage."

He was silent for a moment. Then: "Never mind,

darling; this isn't a very good moment to discuss such matters."

She made no reply. She knew well now what he meant. And in spite of all she had gone through her heart leaped within her.

Peter, watching her, noted a subtle change in her expression, and guessed the reason. She was transfigured with the joy which is the blessed birthright of woman—the knowledge that she is loved by the man she herself loves.

For a while they lay close to each other in silence, dreams of the future intermingling with thoughts of the more urgent present. The sun set. The blue and gold of the evening sky changed to a deep purple and thereafter to the blackness of night. The stars came out and diffused the sky with their pale radiance. The moon was as yet below the eastern horizon.

At last the prosaic Cockney voice of Packham interrupted them: "Best be moving now, sir," he said. "It's after nine o'clock."

An hour and a half later the little party was standing on the beach just to the west of Sfakia. Packham was cautiously flashing to seaward the prearranged signal intended to guide the expected rescuing craft to their position. Peter and Tania, standing close behind him, could see the light from the shaded beam of the torch spasmodically stabbing the darkness. But this they hardly noticed. They were too intent on staring out to sea, watching for the first sign of the dark shape which would ease their minds with the revelation that the vessel had arrived as arranged.

But without moon or wind, the night was so dark and still that the sound of the approaching craft reached their ears before they saw anything. First there was a distant murmur of an engine, barely audible above the noise of the wavelets lapping the shore at their feet. Then there was a splash, which Browning guessed was the dinghy being placed in the water. The rhythmic sound of short

oars sculling shorewards slowly grew louder. And at last they made out the shadowy outline of the boat and its single occupant. A moment later it grated softly on the shingle of the beach.

Browning ordered the two soldiers to embark first, the inflated rubber dinghy being too small to take them all in one trip. He and Tania followed. And as they proceeded away at last from the island, the black silhouette of the rescuing vessel grew visible against the distant horizon.

Peter whispered to Tania: "We shall have a quick trip back, my dear. They've sent an M.T.B. for us. She can do thirty-five knots."

He helped Tania to climb on board, followed her, and stood by her side whilst the First Lieutenant directed the operation of hoisting the boat inboard. Browning knew that speed was essential for this, since every unnecessary minute meant additional risk of detection and the possibility of coming under fire from E.P.I.R.E.S. forces ashore. For which reason he forbore to interrupt.

But as soon as the young officer had reported to his Captain that the boat was inboard, he spoke to him: "Take Miss Maitland down to the wardroom, Number One. She's practically all in. Let her lie down and make her comfortable. I'm going forward to speak to your skipper."

"Aye, aye, sir."

Having thus discharged one important responsibility, Browning walked forward to the bridge. The M.T.B. was already cutting through the water on a southerly course at twelve knots, a speed which would be increased as soon as the distance separating them from Crete was such as to permit with safety the roaring noise emitted by the three engines when running at high speed.

To the Captain, Browning said: "I've a long and very urgent signal to get through to Alexandria. It ought to go as soon as it can be coded."

"I'm afraid," answered the Captain, "we can't send your signal, sir!"

Browning did not wait for him to finish before interjecting: "Why on earth not?"

"We've *no* radio, sir."

Again Browning did not give the officer time to explain properly. "No radio!" he said. "But why?"

"M.L.635 was detailed for this trip. Just as she was leaving harbour she ran one of her engine bearings. We were literally the only craft available to go instead. That's why they sent an M.T.B. It's not our proper job. Last time we were out we had a sea inboard and down into the wireless office. It wrecked the transmitter. Had to be taken up to the base workshop for overhaul."

"But didn't anybody realise you'd no transmitter when you were ordered out?"

"Oh, yes, sir; but they said it didn't matter, as we shouldn't need one on this job."

"My God," commented Browning, "how wrong they were! That's just about torn it."

"Is the message vital?" asked the Captain. "I mean, couldn't it wait until we reached Alex?"

"What's the earliest you can arrive there at your best speed?"

"About nine o'clock to-morrow night, sir."

"That'll be running it much too fine."

"May I ask why, sir?"

"Was the *Colossus* still at Alex. when you left?"

"Yes, sir. But I understand she was to sail for Port Said to-night."

"Exactly," answered Browning grimly; "and she's due to transit the Canal to-morrow. She's going to anchor in the Bitter Lakes during the afternoon. The Sultan of Sinai has been invited to pay the ship a State visit then. The ship is due to make the rest of the passage through the Canal after dark. Shall never complete her voyage to Suez unless I get there first, because I've just unearthed in Crete the most devilishly cunning plot to *blow up the Colossus* and sink her in the Canal to-morrow evening."

Browning, having stated his case in a voice of imperative urgency, relapsed into silence. He was worn out.

And physical weariness had lowered his mental stamina. He felt that he had shot his bolt. Defeated by the defective radio set on Crete itself, he had done his damndest to remedy the situation by a forced and nightmare march across the island, only to be defeated again. The craft which had been sent to rescue them and on which he'd placed all his hopes had no radio at all. And the defeat seemed final.

He supposed there was nothing he could do except to return to Alexandria as soon as possible and report to his Admiral, although it would then be too late; that already the terrible disaster would have occurred; that after all he'd striven for and all that Tania had suffered, Carvellis would have scored. It was true that he might still be in time to ensure that the villainous leader of the E.P.I.R.E.S. did not follow up his success by using the disaster as a means of stirring up anti-British feeling in Egypt. But there would be little satisfaction in that when he remembered that he'd failed to avert the destruction of Britain's newest and finest battleship; when he remembered that the *Colossus* lay, a twisted mass of broken steel, the tomb of a thousand souls, blocking the Suez Canal.

The voice of the Captain of the M.T.B. broke in on his thoughts. He was speaking down the voicepipe to the wheelhouse: "Coxswain, bring her round to one five five. Ring down for thirty knots and then pass the word to the E.R.A. to come and speak to me."

A muffled voice came back up the voicepipe: "One five five, sir. Thirty knots. Jenks'll be up in a minute, sir."

Browning asked: "What's happening?"

"I've just had a look at the chart, sir. I've altered course straight for Port Said. We're not supposed to do more than twenty knots for long periods. But I'm going to risk thirty this time. If the weather holds I reckon I can land you at Port Said before seven to-morrow evening. That might just give you time."

Browning clapped the young officer on the shoulder.

A flash of his usual cheerfulness returned: "My lad, you're a genius! It *will* just give me time. And every minute you can get me there earlier than seven the better. By heaven, we'll do it yet!"

The M.T.B. turned her bows in the direction of Port Said. As her speed increased, her stern sank deep into the water. Peter Browning walked aft and climbed down into the wardroom to fling himself down on a settee bunk.

In his utter weariness, neither the deep-throated roar of the boat's engines nor the lively vibration which seemed to shiver every inch of the wooden hull could stop him from falling at once into a sleep; a sleep as deep as that which had long before fallen upon Tania, who lay on the settee which ran down the other side of the tiny compartment.

And thus they stayed until the sun was very high in the heavens on the next day.

XVII

AS THE first pale light of dawn tinted the eastern horizon, His Majesty's battleship *Colossus* was steaming easily through a mirror-smooth sea towards Port Said at a speed of fifteen knots. The great ship was as yet no more than a black mountainous shape rising out of the sea, her sides pricked with the lights shining from two long rows of scuttles, her upperworks accentuated by the bright glow of her port and starboard bow lights, her fore and main steaming lights. Beneath her fore-foot the sea curled up, broke in a swirl of white foam, and rushed aft to join a dimly phosphorescent wake.

The Commander came out through the starboard after-screen door on to the quarterdeck, his hands stuffed in the pockets of his monkey-jacket. He shivered slightly as he sensed the chill of the early morning. Then he started pacing up and down, his short rubber seaboots making a clip-clopping noise upon the wooden deck.

Two double strokes of the ship's bell told him it was six o'clock. He turned to walk forward, and as he went he heard through the loudspeakers installed throughout the ship the shrill notes of a bugle blare forth the order to the hands to fall in.

By the time he reached the forecastle, the crowd of seamen in their night clothing who had been standing in small groups on the forecastle smoking their first cigarette of the day, had sorted themselves into an orderly pattern of serried ranks disposed on each side of the foremost turret.

The Chief Boatswain's Mate reported the hands present.

The Commander's voice was carried aft by the wind made by the ship herself as she forged through the water towards the land. "Side and cable party muster on the forecastle. Both watches prepare ship for entering harbour." And the ordered ranks of seamen dispersed in disciplined compliance.

There was more light now. There was a yellow glow in the eastern sky. The colour of the sea was changing from pale green to emerald. The sharpness of the horizon ahead was blurred by a dark haze.

Five bells rang throughout the ship. Away on the port beam the sun, with apparent astonishing rapidity observing its slow passage across the heavens during the twelve-hour day, shot up out of the sea. Aft in the *Colossus* the small ensign which had been flying at the gaff throughout the night was replaced by one of large size at the ensign staff. Everywhere on deck scores of hands were at work making the ship ready for entering Port Said and the subsequent passage through the Canal. And ahead the dark haze resolved itself into the low-lying shore of Egypt.

The Commander, satisfied that the routine of the day had started well, walked aft to his cabin.

When an hour later, having bathed and breakfasted, he emerged again dressed in white tunic and trousers, the chill of the early morning, dispersed by the rising sun, had already given way to the heat of the Egyptian

summer. The great ship, now a majestic symphony in pale grey, was an impressive reminder of Britannia's age-long reign over the ocean highways.

Speed had been reduced to ten knots. The *Colossus's* wake was now little more than a ripple. Standing by the guard-rails on the starboard side, the Commander could see the buildings of the town of Port Said standing up in clear relief against the skyline. The pilot vessel rolling lazily at her anchor came into sight. As the battleship steamed past, a motor-boat shot out from under her stern and came alongside. The pilot climbed briskly up the jumping-ladder and was conducted up to the bridge.

The Commander again walked forward—to tour the upperdeck, to satisfy himself that all was ready. He hardly noticed the breakwater as, but a cable away, it passed rapidly by the ship, but he glanced for a moment at the statue of De Lesseps, great French engineer and builder of this, one of the world's two great artificial waterways.

The breakwater gave way to Port Said itself: the hotels, the shops, the bazaars, the water-front, the coaling-barges, a line of liners and merchant ships at their moorings, the advertisement hoardings, the big signs which advertised the Eastern Exchange Hotel, and the world-famous stores of Simon Artz.

The *Colossus* moved steadily on, her speed down to six knots for transit of the Canal. She passed the main part of the town and the Canal Company's offices. Then for a couple of hundred yards the Canal opened out into a basin. And from the steps below Navy House a steam launch shot out into the stream. It made fast under the battleship's quarter, and the Officer of the Guard, a lieutenant of Marines, followed by an orderly carrying a bag of correspondence, climbed aboard.

"Morning, soldier," greeted the Commander, acknowledging his salute. "Come along to the wardroom. We can manage a cup of coffee—or even something stronger if you prefer it!"

As they disappeared through the screen-door into the

superstructure, a dirty looking Egyptian, wearing the inevitable, begrimed *galabieh* and dull crimson *tarbouche*, emerged from the stern-sheets of the steamboat and with amazing agility shot up the jumping-ladder and over the guard-rails.

"Here," said the Officer of the Watch, "what do you want? You can't come inboard like that!"

"Me—gully-gully man," said the dark-skinned individual with a sly yet irresistible smile. In support of this statement he, with a lightning movement of his right hand, produced from behind the Midshipman of the Watch's ear a small yellow fluffy object which resolved itself into an extremely young chicken.

"Good Lord!" said the young gentleman, with considerable astonishment befitting one who was visiting Port Said for the first time. Such a display of sleight-of-hand was not new to the O.O.W., but he could not avoid being intrigued by the exhibition.

The native was quick to follow up his advantage. He solemnly placed the young chick in his mouth, closed it with a snap, munched heartily, and then opened a not particularly wholesome looking chasm to reveal that it was indisputably empty.

"Me," said the Egyptian with obvious self-satisfaction, "velly clever gully-gully man."

The snotty, forgetful of his duties, demanded a further display of the native's powers. Unfortunately the Commander, who had just emerged from the wardroom with the Officer of the Guard, had different ideas. "*Mister Brown!*" he barked. And the emphasis was on the *Mister*.

The result was electrifying. *Mister Brown* thrust his telescope more firmly under his left arm and commanded the boatswain's mate and his side-boys to man the side. Thereafter he dutifully joined the O.O.W. in saluting the marine officer as he followed his orderly down the jumping-ladder into the steamboat.

For a brief moment Commander, Officer of the Watch, and Midshipman watched the craft steaming back down

the Canal towards Port Said, which was already receding into the distance. None gave even a passing thought to what had become of the gully-gully man.

Instead, the Commander said: "Brown, go and tell the padre I shan't be going to divisions this morning."

To the O.O.W. he added by way of explanation. "Too many distractions for the troops to watch this morning. Prayers would be a farce. After all, we don't go through the Suez Canal every day."

That evening the sun had just set when the M.T.B., returning from Crete with Peter and Tania aboard, approached Port Said.

Both were feeling refreshed and invigorated after nearly eighteen hours' rest, though it would take several days before they entirely recovered from their experience on the Greek island. They were standing beside the craft's young Captain on the bridge, watching the purple pall of night spread across sky and sea, the brilliant light which marked for the approaching navigator the northern end of the Suez Canal transformed from a flashing pinpoint into a powerful beam sweeping round the horizon; and around it an ethereal cluster shimmering on the horizon develop into the full brilliance of the town itself, with scores of illuminated windows, street lights, and dazzling arc lamps.

At a word from the skipper the powerful throbbing roar of the engines died down, and the boat's speed dropped from thirty to fifteen knots.

"We can keep this up until we reach the breakwater, sir," he remarked to Browning, "but I'm afraid we'll have to come down to twelve or even ten then. I'm not worrying about the speed limit in the Canal; that's eight knots anyway. It's just that I don't think it's possible to drive her any faster in such confined waters without running the risk of bitching everything at the last moment with the hell of a crash."

"Thinking of taking me straight up the Canal, eh?" smiled Browning grimly. "I'm afraid it wouldn't be

in time even if you could do it at thirty knots. It's already nearly half-past seven. The *Colossus* will be weighing at eight."

Apprehensively Tania asked: "Then what are you going to do, Peter? Surely we aren't too late after all? There must be something we can do."

"There is, my dear. If I land at Port Said, grab a car and drive like hell, there's just a chance that I shall reach the *gare* where Carvellis is waiting with his box of tricks before he lets hell loose."

Her eyes glistened a little in the darkness as she thrilled to the excitement of the chase. "You'll take me, Peter?"

The M.T.B.'s Captain, though concentrating on the task of conning his craft up the channel which led to the breakwatered entrance to the Canal, allowed himself to interject: "I'm game, sir. And you can have any one else you want from my crew. Better take as many as you can stow in the car."

By way of reply to Tania's offer, Browning said: "I'm afraid this is a man's job, my dear." And to the young lieutenant by his side: "It's your job to remain with your ship. But I'll take your Number One, and any two of your chaps you can spare. Better choose men who know how to use a revolver."

"Aye, aye, sir. I'll go alongside by Navy House. You're sure to find a decent car there."

Acknowledgment thus made to Browning's instructions, the Captain called his First Lieutenant and gave him the orders necessary to implement them.

Meantime Browning turned to Tania and clasped her hand in his. "I want you, my dear," he said gently, "to go straight to the Casino Palace Hotel, and I'll do my damndest to be back in time for a late supper. There's something rather important I want to ask you."

She had little doubt what that question was, but, womanlike, she was unable to refrain from asking: "What is it, Peter?"

"Not now, my dear," he answered. "Carvellis must come first."

"But suppose something was to happen to you, Peter. He's dangerous."

Browning laughed, a trifle sardonically: "Dangerous, my darling. I'll say he is. Which is just the reason why I'm not letting you get mixed up with any more of his devilish schemes."

She knew that he had not answered her question, but this seemed of small importance beside the fact that he had indirectly admitted that the task he had taken unto himself to do that night was one involving a great risk to himself—to the man she loved. But she did not forget that upon the result of his task depended the safety of a great ship and the hundreds of men on board, and perhaps much more.

Wherefore she only said, simply: "All right, Peter. I'll go to the hotel—and wait. But promise you'll come and ask me that question to-night, however late it is."

"I promise, my darling," he said softly—"even if it's *very* late."

Further conversation was rendered out of the question by the M.T.B. swinging sharply ninety degrees to starboard, and, a moment later, through as much again to go alongside the jetty in front of Navy House.

Browning, everything forgotten in a flash save the urgency of the chase, was the first to leap ashore as the vessel slithered alongside the stone quay. He dashed across the open space in front of the building to where he had noted half a dozen Service cars parked in a row. He selected the most likely looking—a large Chrysler—prayed that it would prove entirely reliable, swung himself into the driving-seat, and started up the engine.

He expected, as he backed the car out of the rank and turned it towards the road leading to the dock gates, to find the armed trio from the M.T.B. waiting on the jetty ready to jump in. But to his dismay they were not there, nor were they likely to be for some minutes, for the vessel was manœuvring out in the basin in a further attempt to secure alongside. Her Captain had been in too much of a hurry to reach his berth in the first instance. Hardly

had Browning jumped ashore than the vessel's own wash, reflected back off the walls of the basin, had had the effect of carrying her away from the wall before she could be secured. And within such a confined space the task of manœuvring alongside was not an easy one. Indeed, Browning, who took in the situation at a glance, doubted whether the skipper would achieve it unless he took his craft right out into the stream again.

He glanced at his watch—it was five to eight—and swore audibly to himself. Hell's bells! Were the fates always to be against him? It must be thirty miles at least to *Gare 17*. He'd have to average fifty if he was to beat the *Colossus* to it. It was doubtful if he could manage it. It was a dead certainty that he couldn't afford to waste a single moment. There was only one answer. Crazy though it might seem, he'd have to go on by himself, taking comfort in the thought that he had a gun and need not hesitate to use it. The rest of the party would have to follow as soon as they could.

He leaped out of the car and cupped his hands to his mouth: "I can't wait for you," he yelled across the intervening water to the M.T.B. "There's not a minute to spare. I'm going on. The rest of you follow in another car as soon as you can. Remember: *Gare 17*."

He repeated the rendezvous twice, and finished with the additional direction: "The second *gare* beyond the Bitter Lakes."

Five minutes later he was clear of the dockyard and driving like a madman down the long straight stretch of road which ran beside the placid waters of the Suez Canal towards Ismailia, the Bitter Lakes and beyond.

The majority of the Suez Canal *gares* conform to a common pattern. Each is a little oasis of trees amidst the desert sand. Each contains a two-storeyed red-tiled house constructed of wood for the Canal Company's official and his family. Between house and water is a tall mast on which are hoisted the signals—flags by day

and coloured lights by night—used for directing the movements of ships in the Canal.

Gare 17 accorded with this pattern. The ground floor of the house was given up to offices and store-rooms. The living quarters were on the first floor—two bedrooms opening off a large sitting-room, whose double windows opened on to a balcony which overlooked the Canal.

Here at a quarter to nine in the evening four men were gathered together. They were a curious collection. There was a slim individual with a slight moustache, dressed in the dark-blue serge suit appropriate to an official of the Canal Company, by whom he was indeed employed as custodian of this particular *gare*. To them he was known as Monsieur Jules Leblanc. It goes without saying that the Company was quite unaware of his activities on behalf of Roderigo Carvellis, to whom he was on occasion known as Omicron. As Stetson was the channel of communication from Carvellis's H.Q. in Crete to his agents in Egypt, so was Jules Leblanc their means of signalling to Crete. The signal-mast in front of the *gare*, which had been a landmark at that spot for half a century or more, was an unsuspected support for the aerial of a wireless transmitter.

Had the lieutenant who had been on duty as Officer of the Watch that forenoon in the *Colossus* been present, he *might* have recognised the dirty looking Egyptian who sat on Monsieur Leblanc's right. For he, after effectively playing the part of a gully-gully man, had only recently come ashore from that ship by surreptitiously joining the Sultan of Sinai's entourage after discharging his task of placing Z weapons in three of the fifteen-inch magazines. In Carvellis's organisation he was referred to as Theta.

Lounging indolently against the mantelpiece, the usual cigarette drooping from his lower lip, was Roger Stetson. He had conveniently taken refuge at the *gare* since his fortunate escape from the camel incident at Twenty Kilometre Crossing.

Lastly—and one can be excused for saying "but not least," for it was so very far from being the case—was the

man who was in very truth the master of all three: Roderigo Carvellis. Though he might at the moment affect the blue garb of an Egyptian porter, there was no disguising his swarthy features, his bloodshot eyes, his thin lips, from which sprouted the butt of a half-smoked cigar. And there was no concealing the power of his personality. He dominated the little group with the overpowering magnetism of one whose mind, long warped by frustrated ambition and vanity, conceived nothing save that which would lead him to the attainment of his own evil ends.

At the moment he was crouched over a box on the table, making final adjustments to a small radio set, judged by the trio of control knobs, one red, two black, with, between them, two glass-fronted ammeters, and the short vertical rod aerial rising from its side.

Though all four men were for the moment silent, one sensed a certain tenseness in the atmosphere, as if they were waiting a trifle impatiently for something vital to happen.

At last the telephone rang. All four men were at once on the alert. The Frenchman walked over to the corner of the room and lifted the instrument. "*Voici gare dix-sept*," he said. "*Qui parle?*"

There was a pause. "*Merci!*"

The receiver was replaced. The speaker returned to the centre of the room. "*Gare 16*," he said, "reports that the ship has just entered the Canal from the Bitter Lakes, General."

Carvellis removed the cigar from his mouth. "So," he said, "everything goes according to plan. Good! *Very good!*"

"How long now, Jules?" asked Stetson.

Leblanc answered: "Half an hour; perhaps a little more."

Carvellis looked at the clock on the wall. The hands pointed to eight-fifteen. He rose and walked over to the shuttered windows. "Put out the light, Jules," he said.

When the room was in darkness, Carvellis flung open the window and walked out on to the balcony. It was a clear night, and by the light of the moon the broad black ribbon of the Canal could be seen stretching away into the darkness on both sides of the *gare* between the night-white sand of the desert.

The agent Theta grunted: "You won't be able to see the ship until she comes round the bend."

"How far is that?" asked Stetson.

The Frenchman answered: "Four kilometres."

"Exactly," commented Carvellis, turning back into the room. "And the point at which she must be destroyed is three kilometres from here. Any closer would be somewhat unhealthy for us in here, I fancy. Therefore Theta will keep a careful watch out on the balcony."

As the agent rose and walked towards the window in compliance, Carvellis said: "Report immediately she is sighted. Five minutes later I shall press the switch."

Leaving Theta on watch, Carvellis closed the shutters. Leblanc switched on the light.

The leader of the E.P.I.R.E.S. resumed his seat at the table, his eyes concentrated on the radio transmitter, which to him represented a visible part of the new weapon he was about to put to such effective use. But he showed no sign of nervous tension. The same could not be said of the other two men. The Frenchman, to relieve his growing anxiety, began pacing up and down the room. Stetson smoked no more than half a cigarette before throwing it away and at once lighting another.

Presently the silence was broken by the sound of a car approaching at high speed. It was not the first, several having driven past the house during the last hour, travelling between Ismailia and Suez. But this one on reaching the *gare* evidently braked and stopped. Then the engine was switched off.

Leblanc paused in his stride. Stetson looked towards the door, an unspoken question upon his square features. Only Carvellis seemed to take no notice.

There was a loud knocking at the door of the house on

the floor below. The Frenchman would have moved to answer it, but after one pace he stopped and looked to his leader for instructions.

"Wait," commanded Carvellis.

"Many people call here," said Leblanc, "to ask whether they are on the right road for Suez or Ismailia. It is probably only one of those."

"If it is," interjected Stetson, "it would be best if the door is answered without delay."

Carvellis accepted this advice and waved Leblanc towards the door. The French official, glad of any opportunity to relieve the anxious tension of the last half-hour, pattered down the stairs into the hall. Drawing back the bolts he opened the door. To his surprise there was no one there. His eyes were not fully accustomed to the dark, but so far as he could see there appeared to be no one either to right or left; nor could he see any sign of a car.

Curiosity overcame caution, and he decided to step out into the garden to investigate further—which was a rash decision. He had only taken four paces to his left when, from nowhere, something very hard descended upon his skull. A figure, indistinguishable in the darkness, fell upon his unconscious form, and in less than a minute had gagged him and secured his wrists and ankles.

That task completed, Peter Browning rose to his feet. "One rogue out of harm's way," he thought. "Wonder how many more there are? Can't be helped now if it's half a dozen. No time for finesse. Have to take the bull by the horns and rely on the M.T.B. party coming before very long."

He moved towards the now open door of the house.

In the upstairs room Carvellis began to show distinct signs of impatience when, after three minutes had elapsed, there was no sign of Leblanc returning. "What on earth can the man be doing?" he asked.

Before Stetson could reply, they heard the sound of the front door closing, followed by footsteps on the stairs.

"Here he is," remarked Stetson.

As soon as the door began to open Carvellis snapped: "What was it, Leblanc?"

The reply he received was the last he expected: "Put your hands up, Carvellis. You, too, Stetson."

Standing in the now wide open doorway, holding a revolver which was pointing ominously towards them, was Commander Peter Browning.

"If I were you, Carvellis," he went on, "I should give up the habit of smoking a cigar. It gives you away in that get-up. No self-respecting Egyptian porter can afford such things. Besides, I've seen you dressed like that before. I should try something else next time."

Browning's banter was intended to gain time. If there were no more than these two men to deal with, he should be able to handle them without undue difficulty until help arrived. But there might be others elsewhere in the house. For any sound of their movements he was listening intently.

But time also allowed Carvellis to regain his composure after the shock which Browning's appearance had given him.

Dressed as an Egyptian porter, he was, with his hands raised above his head, an incongruous little figure. Yet his evil cunning found expression. "I congratulate you, Commander Browning," he said, "on your escape from Nelson's Island. I confess to wondering how you managed it. I should also be interested to know what led you to come here this evening. Was it coincidence or something else? Then, again, what have you done to my friend Leblanc, who opened the door to you just now?"

"Never mind all that, Carvellis," cut in Browning. "The only point is that I know why you're here *and* what that apparatus is for."

He had already advanced a couple of paces into the room, and now, unguardedly, he stretched out his right arm and pointed towards the radio transmitter on the table with his revolver. In a flash Stetson saw his chance. He swung his right leg upwards, and with his foot kicked Browning's hand holding the revolver towards the ceiling.

This unexpected action caused his finger to clutch the trigger. There was a loud report, a noise of splintering glass, and the room was plunged into darkness. The bullet had, by chance, destroyed the electric-light pendant.

Simultaneously Carvellis and Stetson flung themselves upon Browning. Their combined strength was more than enough to fell him to the floor, where he lay fighting fiercely beneath them.

Out on the balcony the watching Theta, alarmed by the disturbance, threw open the shutters. He hesitated for a moment in the window trying to identify the struggling trio, then threw himself into the fray. The onslaught of three men was more than Browning could long withstand. After four minutes Theta and Stetson were successful in pinning him to the floor—a sweating, panting, temporarily exhausted individual.

Carvellis went into one of the adjoining bedrooms and returned with a sheet, which he tore into long strips. With these Browning was, despite a final struggle, effectively bound and gagged.

“That will do for the moment,” snapped Carvellis as they pushed Browning’s prone body into a corner of the room. “I will deal with that damned Englishman for good and all presently. The ship must come first. Is it in sight yet, Theta?”

The agent strode out on to the balcony and looked to the left along the Canal. “Not yet,” he reported. “But it cannot be long now.”

Stetson said: “I hope your apparatus was not upset by the disturbance, General.”

Carvellis was already examining his transmitter by the aid of a torch. “No,” he grunted. “All is well.”

Browning, lying in acute discomfort upon the floor, could see Carvellis’s silhouette framed in the unshuttered window against the night sky, as he sat waiting for the moment of his supreme triumph. And he was sick with anger as he realised that, due to his own impetuous stupidity, he was on the verge of final failure to avert

a disaster to the *Colossus*. Only one all too slender chance of avoiding the tragedy remained. If only the party from the M.T.B. should turn up in time. Wherefore Browning concentrated all his senses on listening for the sound of an approaching car.

He was interrupted almost at once by the excited voice of Theta. "She's coming round the bend now."

"Perfect," gloated Carvellis. "Just five minutes to nine. At the hour . . ."

He left the remainder of the sentence unsaid; instead, rose from the table, crossed to the window and looked down the Canal. He wanted to confirm with his own eyes that the lights of the battleship could indeed be seen in the distance approaching the *gare*.

"Yes," he commented, "she's coming!"

Then he returned to the table and his radio transmitter. He looked again at his watch. "Four minutes," he snapped.

And as the seconds ticked by, Peter Browning continued to lie on the floor in the darkness, powerless to intervene, seemingly destined to be a passive spectator of one of the greatest single disasters ever conceived by the evil mind of man.

XVIII

PRENTICE'S REQUEST, submitted to the Admiral at the suggestion of Hardcastle, to proceed to Port Said in the *Westminster* for a tour of the Canal ports had been approved. Thereafter events had for him gone exceedingly well, except that his visit to Port Tewfik had lasted rather longer than he had anticipated. As a result, he did not leave the port at the southern end of the Canal until after six in the evening.

And it was nearly eight as the naval car in which he was sitting beside the driver approached the lights of Ismailia on the return journey to Alexandria.

He was preoccupied with wondering whether it would be better to attempt the shorter but rougher road across the Delta in the darkness rather than the main road through Cairo, when he was jerked back into the present by the realisation that the driver had braked sharply and was stopping the car. He was about to ask the reason when he saw that, just ahead, someone was signalling them with a torch to stop. A moment later he saw in the light of the vehicle's head-lamps that there were three men, who, judging by their uniforms, were respectively a sub-lieutenant and two seamen.

As the car stopped the officer approached and said in tones both agitated and urgent: "Our car's had an accident, sir."

Only then did Prentice catch sight in the darkness of a car lying half-overtured in the ditch by the side of the road. "Anybody hurt?" he asked.

"No, sir. But it's most frightfully urgent that we should get to *Gare 17* at once. Commander Browning—"

At the mention of his friend's name Prentice snapped: "Commander Browning? How does he come into this?" The next words which tumbled from the sub-lieutenant's

lips might have been considered an understatement of the situation, but there was no denying that he considered the matter of the gravest importance: "He's trying to stop someone blowing up the *Colossus*, sir."

"Blowing up the *Colossus*!" repeated Prentice. "But damn it all, there's the ship coming down the Canal now."

He pointed towards where, some two miles away, the great hull and superstructure of the battleship was visible steaming at a sedate six knots towards them, a searchlight rigged in her bows sweeping its beam from side to side of the Canal.

The young officer answered: "I know, sir. That's why there's no time to be lost."

"Tell me," said Prentice, "how do you know anything about this?"

"We brought Commander Browning back from Crete, sir. He'd been there to rescue a girl—Tania Maitland, the actress from *Black and White*—from the E.P.I.R.E.S. She heard all about a plot to blow up the *Colossus* whilst he was there. A chap called Carvellis—"

To Prentice that name was enough to stir him into instant action. He might not fully comprehend all that was afoot, but if Roderigo Carvellis was involved, he had no doubt that it was something evil.

To the sub-lieutenant he snapped: "Jump in the back of the car with your men—quick!" And as they complied, he was obtaining directions from them as to the whereabouts of the *gare* and urging his driver to turn the car and to drive there like blue blazes.

Only one thing consoled him. The *Colossus* was still some six miles from the *Gare* 17. With the advantage of sixty miles an hour against six knots they must be able to reach the *gare* with several minutes to spare. And during the drive there was just time to form a plan of action.

"I'll take one of your men round on the Canal side of the house, Sub.," he said, "and break in from there. You and the rest try from the front. Our object: to get inside at all costs without a moment's delay. Have your

revolvers ready, but only shoot if you must. Smash anything that looks like a radio set. And pray heaven we find Commander Browning safe."

The dark silhouette of the cluster of trees which surrounded the *gare* loomed up in the darkness ahead.

"Slow down now, Atkins," ordered Prentice to his driver, "and put out your lights."

The white posts on each side of the gateway into the fenced-off grounds of the *gare* materialised out of the blackness.

"Drive straight in, Atkins," ordered Prentice. "Stop five yards from the door."

It was the seaman driver's intention to comply, but he was both young and affected by the excitement of the moment; and having swerved into the drive, he was about to place his foot on the brake to bring the car to rest when the silence of the night was shattered by the loud report of a revolver shot from within the house. That, and Prentice's ejaculation: "God, what was that!" were enough to make him tread hard on the accelerator pedal instead of the brake. The car leaped forward, and, with the rending noise of splintering woodwork, crashed into the porch in front of the house.

Fortunately none of the occupants was more than shaken, and after a brief moment to recover from the jarring shock they sprang into action, flinging open the doors and climbing out. But, even as they did so, the first flicker of flames licked round the crumpled bonnet.

"Christ," ejaculated Able Seaman Atkins, "she's on fire!"

Flustered already by the accident, he would have forgotten the object of their mission and wasted time trying to find the extinguisher within the wreckage of the vehicle; but Prentice cried: "Never mind that, Atkins—your job now is to break into the house. Come on everyone—quick!"

With which words he darted round towards the Canal, followed a yard behind by the single seaman who had been detailed to accompany him.

In the first-floor room Peter Browning still lay helpless in the corner near the door, watching the figure of Carvellis crouched over his transmitter on the table. The indirect light from the torch with which he was staring at his watch gave to his swarthy face a grotesque appearance which seemed to accentuate the ingrained evil of his nature.

"Two minutes," he snapped.

Stetson, unnecessarily, asked: "Is the ship still approaching, Theta?"

Carvellis answered irritably: "Don't be a damn fool! Of course she is."

It was then that Browning first smelt the fumes of burning petrol and the scent of charred wood filtering through the crack under the door. As each moment they grew stronger, he asked himself what on earth could be the cause.

Stetson was the next to smell fire, and of this, as a result of an accident in his childhood, he had always been mortally afraid.

"There is something burning," he said in a tone of unconcealed alarm.

Carvellis, concentrating on his instrument and his watch, had smelt nothing, and, being preoccupied, responded, without concern: "*Ja!*"

Which was sufficient confirmation for the frightened German. With the intention of investigating the source of the fire, he walked across to the door and flung it open. At once he staggered back as the heat of the roaring furnace which enveloped the staircase seared his face. The flames licked hungrily round the door-frame into the room with an angry crackling sound.

Stetson let out a scream of fear and jumped back, to collide violently with the table. The impact hurled it over with a crash on to the floor. Too late Carvellis made a clumsy but unsuccessful attempt to save his apparatus. Then he leaped to his feet with a fierce unprintable oath as he saw, lit by the lurid glare of the fire, the wreckage

of all his hopes, a tangled mass of condensers, coils, and broken valves.

John Prentice reached the Canal side of the house in time to hear Stetson's scream. He hesitated at the sound. The next moment Carvellis's oath reached his ears. He recognised the voice instantly and needed nothing more to spur him to instant action.

"Come on, Jackson," he shouted to his companion, "we've got 'em cold."

As, revolver at the ready, he advanced to the foot of the steps leading up to the balcony, he saw in the light of the glow of the fire, which was visible through the window, the figure of the watching Theta on the balcony. He started up the steps towards him.

He was just half-way up when, without warning, the terrified Stetson shot like a rocket from the window and hurled himself down the steps. By a stroke of fortune he no more than grazed past Prentice and Jackson in the process. On reaching the bottom he scuttled like a frightened rabbit into the trees.

As the German disappeared, Prentice resumed his interrupted climb, crying at the same time: "Never mind that one for the moment, Jackson."

He had intended, on reaching the balcony, to deal first with Theta, but before he could do so he caught sight of Carvellis standing within the room, stupefied perhaps by the sudden turn of events. Prentice had no intention of losing the opportunity of dealing with the supreme villain of the piece. He turned, rushed into the room, and, rugger fashion, tackled him low.

As Carvellis fell to the floor, his head struck a corner of the overturned table with a sickening thud. Prentice did not wait to see whether he was more than stunned. It was for the moment sufficient that Carvellis lay still. Scrambling to his feet, he noted that Jackson was dealing in no uncertain manner with the agent, from whose battered face blood was running freely. Then he turned to the urgent task of finding Browning.

He glanced round the room, half-illuminated by the

flickering light of the flames which enveloped one wall, half-obscured by the smoke which filled his lungs and made him cough and splutter. He stumbled forward, groping his way round the overturned table. One foot trod on the smashed transmitter, grinding the glass of the broken valves into small fragments. The other came into contact with an object which sent him down on his knees groping for confirmation as to its identity. Yes, it was a human form, but an unconscious one.

The flames were dangerously close. The heat was almost more than he could stand. Only with the super-human strength borne of desperation was he able to drag the body towards the window.

There was less smoke and more light there and he was able to identify it. It *was* Browning. Thank God, he had come to his friend's rescue just in time. But they had not yet reached safety. Each moment the flames were coming closer. It would only be a little time before the whole room was a roaring furnace. He must get the unconscious Peter out of it all and away from the house before the roof fell in and the whole building collapsed in a heap of flaming timbers.

Prentice glanced round for help. Close at hand, Able Seaman Jackson was sitting astride his prone opponent and engaged in rendering him unconscious by battering his head against the floor.

Prentice yelled: "Jackson! Leave that blighter now. Come and give me a hand with Commander Browning. Quick, man!"

The seaman jumped to his side. Together they lifted Browning and carried him out of the room and down into the garden.

"Phew!" said Prentice, as they laid the unconscious body on the ground. "That was a close shave."

"Is the Commander hurt?" asked Jackson.

"I'm not sure," replied Prentice, producing a knife and cutting the strips of linen tied round his wrists and ankles. "I'm hoping that he was only overcome by the heat."

There was immediate confirmation of this statement. As a result of breathing the fresher air of the garden, Browning stirred, and began to recover consciousness. Prentice and Jackson, exhausted and breathing heavily from their recent exertions, neither pressed him to talk nor thrust explanation upon him.

Browning was the first to speak, with a question on the subject which was uppermost in his mind. "Is the ship safe?" he said.

In answer Prentice helped his friend to his feet and said: "Look, old boy!"

Steaming past the *gare* was the massive shape of the *Colossus*, lights blazing from every scuttle in her hull and superstructure.

Browning clapped his hand down on Prentice's shoulder. "Good man," he said. "We've done it. She's safe."

He turned to Able Seaman Jackson and clasped him by the hand: "And well done you too, man. I owe you both a lot——"

His last words were drowned by a sudden agonised scream. Startled by the interruption, the three men looked round. A terrifying sight, sufficient to make the blood of the bravest turn cold, met their eyes. Standing on the balcony, swaying drunkenly, all his clothing aflame, was Roderigo Carvellis.

"My God, look!" exclaimed Browning involuntarily.

Before they could move, the burning, shrieking figure dashed down the steps, ran madly across the garden and plunged headlong into the waters of the Canal. And as a flaming torch is extinguished by water, so did the burning figure of Roderigo Carvellis sizzle for a moment and then go out.

Browning and Prentice were momentarily too stunned by the appalling sight to move or speak. Able Seaman Jackson broke the silence. "Oughtn't we to rescue him?" he asked.

"I don't think there'll be much to rescue after that," answered Browning sombrely, "but we'll have a look."

They climbed down the bank and stood by the edge of the Canal. The dark waters were disturbed only by the wash of the great ship which had so recently passed them, and behind, with a rending crash amidst a cloud of flying sparks, the roof of the flaming house fell in.

When it was over, Browning commented: "A fitting tomb for one Hun at any rate."

Prentice answered: "'Fraid not, Peter. Stetson wasn't in the house at the end. He got away just as we arrived. He ran like a terrified maniac into the trees. We hadn't time to pursue him."

"Well, John," was Browning's answer, "I don't suppose it will be long before he's picked up. But I confess to being disappointed that he didn't suffer the same fate as his master."

The words were hardly out of his mouth before they heard the voice of the Sub. of the M.T.B. "We've collared this chap, sir," he announced.

And Browning and Prentice turned to see the figure of Roger Stetson, hatred displayed in every line of his face, in the firm hold of the driver of his car and the other seaman from the M.T.B.

Browning and Prentice stopped a passing Army lorry to obtain transport for the whole party, including their prisoner, back to Port Said. During the journey the two friends had much to explain to each other—Browning to recount his adventures in Crete, including the rescue of Tania and the discovery of the plot to destroy the *Colossus*; Prentice to describe his encounter with Suliman Daub, the recovery of the stolen treaty, his chance visit to the Canal area, and his fortuitous discovery of the M.T.B. party with their wrecked car.

At the end Browning commented: "You know, John, you and I seem to have had rather more than our fair share of excitement during the last three weeks."

Prentice answered: "I was wondering what would have happened to both of us if we hadn't had more than our fair share of good luck! Because you know, Peter,

we've been more than once too damn near missing the bus for my liking."

Browning only smiled: "To think," he said, "that when the Admiralty told me I was coming out here four weeks ago, I thought I was in for a dull time."

It was nearly midnight when they entered the Casino Palace Hotel. Browning indicated that he was going up to see Tania, to let her know they were back safely. At which Prentice remarked: "I shall be extremely tactful, old boy, and leave you to it. But you might let her know that she won't be bothered by the objectionable attentions of Roger Stetson any more."

Browning's cryptic answer was: "I've something more important to talk to her about than that, John."

Two months later, in the Alhambra Theatre at Alexandria, the curtain fell upon the last scene of *Black and White*. The company, after touring Palestine, Syria, and the Lebanon had returned for one more week at the naval port. And this was Saturday night.

As the final tonic chord was held by the orchestra, tumultuous applause broke loose from the audience, in a roar of noise ranging from whistles and stamping of feet by those in the gallery down to the more sedate but nevertheless warmly appreciative hand-clapping by the occupants of the stalls and boxes.

The curtain rose to reveal the entire company, in whose centre, a golden radiance of beauty, stood Tania Maitland.

The curtain fell, then rose again. And after a moment the principal comedian stepped forward to the footlights. He raised his hand for silence, and, reluctantly, the applause died away. There was an underlying note of seriousness in his voice, curiously alien to his professional character, as he said: "Ladies and Gentlemen—On behalf of the whole of our company may I thank you for the wonderful reception you have given us to-night. It's been great fun for us. And that goes for every performance and every audience to whom we've played during the last three months. This is the end of *Black and*

White, but in spite of that I hope we shall all meet again soon. On Monday we start rehearsals for a new show, *Gold and Silver*, which we expect to bring to Alexandria in about a month's time. For us *Black and White* will always remain a special memory if only because of the rather startling incidents which interrupted performances during the first month of its run. First we discovered that we were harbouring a viper in our bosom in the shape of Roger Stetson. You will remember that he was, in fact, an agent in the employ of Roderigo Carvellis, the leader of the E.P.I.R.E.S. rebels in Crete, who used his act in our show as an indirect means of communicating information to his confederates in Egypt. There was the astonishing evening in this very theatre when Stetson leapt across these footlights and fled through the auditorium when he realised that the military police were waiting in the wings to arrest him. Stetson was captured later, after Roderigo Carvellis had come to a sticky end after an unsuccessful attempt to destroy the battleship *Colossus* in the Suez Canal. And it was our lovely Tania who did so much to bring that about."

For a moment the speaker was interrupted by an outburst of applause, which Tania acknowledged with a slight bow, but he raised his hand and again demanded silence.

"I've not quite finished," he said. "To-night I want to tell you the sequel to that adventure. As you will remember, the officer who played the chief part in bringing about Carvellis's downfall was Commander Browning, who, I am glad to say, is with us to-night."

The speaker pointed towards the stage box to his right where Browning and Prentice were seated, together with two of their mess-mates. In response to an outburst of applause, Browning, not a little embarrassed, was urged by his companions to rise and bow.

Again the principal comedian demanded silence. "It gives me great pleasure to be able to announce," he said, "and I would add that I have full permission from both

parties concerned to do so, that Commander Browning was married this afternoon."

This statement provoked from the audience applause, intermingled with a certain amount of good-natured but, in such circumstances, inevitable chaff. Even Prentice could not refrain from remarking: "Peter, I do believe you're blushing."

"I wish," answered Browning, "I'd never been bamboozled into agreeing to this pantomime."

"If you hadn't," grinned his friend, "we'd have agreed for you!"

The comedian held up his hand once more for silence. "My last word," he said. "I am especially happy to be able to-night to introduce you to *Mrs. Browning*."

He paused, leaving a sudden hush consequent on the inevitable curiosity which spread through the whole house at this announcement. Then he stepped back two paces to the row of artists behind him.

"Ladies and Gentlemen," he said, taking Tania's hand and leading her forward to the footlights, "our Tania Maitland—now Mrs. Peter Browning."

Amidst the outburst of cheers which greeted this announcement Tania stood, her natural beauty transfigured by happiness, alone in the centre of the footlights. She bowed first to the audience and then to the remainder of the cast, who were also applauding her. From the gallery down to the stalls spread the strident shouts of "Speech." And when it was clear that they were not to be denied, she dropped a graceful curtsey and said sweetly: "Thank you; thank you all from the bottom of my heart."

The principal comedian stepped to her side. "There's one thing, Mrs. Browning," he said, "which we want to know, and I'm sure the whole audience do, too. Does this mean you'll be giving up the stage?"

Above the cries of "No" and "Shame" which arose from the more strident voices in the gallery, her reply was scarcely audible. "I think you ought to ask my husband."

The stalls, containing many officers who knew Browning well, heard it, and at once turned towards him and good-naturedly clamoured for a reply. He would have retired to the darker recesses of the box had not his companions, led by Prentice, virtually ejected him out on to the stage itself, where in the unaccustomed glare of the footlights there remained nothing he could decently do save join his wife in the centre.

Holding her hand in his, he said: "On behalf of my wife"—and here he looked at Tania, and she returned his smile—"and myself, may I thank you all very much for to-night. And in return may I say that my wife—your Tania—will be with you in *Gold and Silver* in a month's time. And she'll be playing to audiences in the Middle East as long as I'm in this part of the world. She *did* promise to *obey*!"

Laughter and delighted applause greeted Browning's words. But he raised his hand for silence. "And now," he said, "before we break up this very happy evening, I'm going to ask *our* Tania to give us one more song."

He turned to his wife. "It's all yours, darling," he said and stepped back.

The stage lights dimmed, leaving Tania alone in a white circle of limelight. And standing thus in all her glorious beauty, her lovely soprano hushed the whole theatre into entranced silence:

*Oh, Pompey is a fine town, with ships in the Bay,
And I wish in my heart I was only there to-day;
I wish in my heart I was far away from here,
A-sittin' in the parlour and talking to my dear,
For it's Home, Dearie, Home.*

"Sing, everybody, sing," she cried. The sentiments expressed in this traditional naval song were so appropriate that the predominantly naval audience needed no second bidding to join in the chorus. The words seemed to lift the very roof as they poured from nearly six hundred throats:

*It's Home, Dearie, Home, it's Home I'd like to be;
The topsails are hoisted and we're off to sea.
The oak and the ash and the bonny ivy tree,
They're all growing green in the Old Countree,
For it's Home, Dearie, Home.*

The remaining verses followed in like fashion:

*Now there's a wind that blows and it's blowing
from the West,
And of all the winds that blow it's the one I love the
best,
For it blows at our backs and it shakes the pennon
free,
And soon will blow us back to the Old Countree,
For it's Home, Dearie, Home.*

*And if it's a lass she shall wear the golden ring,
And if it's a lad he shall live to serve his King,
With his hat and his silk and his little coat of blue,
He'll fight with old St. Vincent as his daddy used
to do,
For it's Home, Dearie, Home.*

And, with the words of the chorus rolling once again round the Alhambra Theatre, Alexandria, we take our leave of Commander and Mrs. Peter Browning:

*It's Home, Dearie, Home, it's Home I'd like to be;
The topsails are hoisted and we're off to sea.
The oak and the ash and the bonny ivy tree,
They're all growing green in the Old Countree,
For it's Home, Dearie, Home.*

THE END



AIDE-de-CAMP'S LIBRARY

Accn. No.....

1. Books may be retained for a period not exceeding fifteen days.